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MISERICORDIA.

BY

ETHEL LYNN LINTON.

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APPLETONS' NEW HANDY-VOLUME SERIES.

MISERICORDIA.

A STORY.

BY

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MISERICORDIA.

I.

"Two wrongs do not make one right; and suspicion and jealousy are as wrong as flirting and deception, Millicent mine," said her elder sister, Helen, representing philosophy and wise conduct.

"Right or wrong, I will not bear it!" was the passionate reply, tears flashing in a pair of bright brown eyes, and as much anger as sorrow quivering in the lines of a rose-red, pouting mouth.

"Well, I have advised you! You will come the worst off in the end if you cross swords with Noel about Mrs. Fairclough," the other returned. "You are not strong enough for him, and you will only cut your own fingers if you begin to fight."

"I do not care if I do, Helen! If I cut my own fingers, as you say, I shall at least have cut hers; and that will be something," said Millicent, looking undeniably beautiful between passion and anger; but though so beautiful, somehow not

quite satisfactory—less the ideal woman of our dreams, *tacens et placens*, than a passionate and exaggerated girl who was always up in the clouds for baseless ecstasies or down in the depths of despair for imaginary sorrows ; always either loving or hating without good reason for either, and as excessive in gratitude as she was apt for offense—a girl never under the guidance of reason, and who knew as little of common-sense as of patience and self-control—a girl who was allowed on all hands to have a "good heart" in the abstract, but whose temper and daily bearing in the concrete were trials sometimes insupportable to those with whom she came in contact.

"My dear child, you are a little fool!" said Helen, with more truth than courtesy.

"Abuse is no argument," returned Millicent, so far her sister's dialectical superior ; "you have said that about twice a day ever since I can remember. Once more does not count."

"Have I? It is a pity that, having said it some thousands of times, you should not have profited by the information," said Helen, with provoking quietness ; "for I cannot say that you grow wiser, dear, as you grow older—rather the contrary."

"Perhaps not ; but perhaps you will find, some day, that I have a little more sense than you give me credit for, and that I am not quite such a fool as I look," retorted Millicent, on her dignity.

"When I find it I will welcome it," said Helen. "But I do not think you will show this hidden wisdom by quarreling with Noel, and trying to 'find out all about Mrs. Fairclough,' as you call it —poor soul! as if there was anything to find out about her at all!—because you have a fit of jealousy. For if there is no real foundation for your jealousy, it is contemptible; and if there is, it is humiliating. A girl of spirit has only one course open to her if her lover prefers some one else; and a girl of sense does not torment herself and every one about her with fads and fancies."

"We can all speak calmly on what does not touch us," said Millicent; "but you are no more patient than any one else, Helen, when you are personally concerned."

"No?" laughed the other, good-humoredly. "That means, Mill, that I am almost as silly as you are sometimes."

"And a great deal more disagreeable," flashed out Millicent. "No, I did not mean that!" she said, going up to her sister and kissing her with quick repentance; "it is I who am cross and disagreeable. You are always good, Helen, and I am, as you say, a little fool, and never shall be anything else."

"But dearer than all the wise folks in the world," said Helen, affectionately smoothing the tumbled hair lying loose on the flushed cheeks, and giving back her kiss with interest. On which

their little quarrel passed, as their quarrels always did, into a rosary of mutual endearments; each saying that the other was the sweetest kind of thing to be found within the four seas—the one for childlike charm, the other for maternal tenderness—and that when they wrangled, as they did so often, they meant nothing by it but to express their love for each other in another form—like the strange tenses of irregular verbs—always the same verb, however oddly metamorphosed.

Their quarrel now was on what was beginning to be a dangerously frequent theme—Millicent's jealousy of Noel Thorburn's attentions to the widow who had lately come to Marston, a Mrs. Fairclough, of the Cottage; and her growing determination to bring down on the peccant heads of *fiancé* and acquaintance alike the punishment which, whatever it might be, could not be heavy enough for their deserts or her desires. For the average Englishwoman is a rather restricted kind of proprietress over husband or lover, all things considered; and Millicent Despard was by no means superior to that average.

Looking at things calmly, and without the exaggeration of passion, it seemed somewhat difficult to bring down punishment of any kind on the head of the pretty widow whose only sin was her beauty and her sole crime her charm. For the six months of her life at Marston she had lived with the most blameless propriety; and without show-

ing that she wished to propitiate society, had done nothing that could be considered as offense or defiance. She mixed herself up in no gossip ; put herself forward in no social movement ; was always courteous and sweet and gentle and delightful ; and if ever a woman's armor may be said to be invulnerable, surely Mrs. Fairclough's was without a loose joint anywhere.

But, for all that, Millicent Despard, who was no more her equal in mind or character than a robin-redbreast is equal to a bird-of-paradise, being jealous of Noel Thorburn's unconcealed admiration, vowed that she would bring the fair widow to shame and her lover to confusion of face —though how this was to be done remained as yet among the unformed things of chaos and the future.

Perhaps it was only natural that Millicent should resent Clarissa Fairclough's personality. Before her arrival, she herself, the pretty younger daughter of the retired admiral, had been the acknowledged beauty of the place ; and if one's world is but a nutshell, one holds by it as one's kingdom, and not one among us but resents attempts at dispossession. Every woman is proud of her nutshell where she has been the queen emmet, and ruled over the fancies and feelings of her brother emmets ; where she has been the "cynosure" and the object of general admiration. Millicent had been specially proud of hers. Not to

speak of Frank Hardisty, had it not included among her tribute the love of Noel Thorburn—or what passed for love with him and her alike? And was not rich and handsome Noel Thorburn, of Thorburn Hall, the matrimonial prize of Marston? And if he did just a little frighten her because he was grave and intense, and she, though quick to feel and fond of superlatives, was more shallow than strong and more noisy than deep, yet it pleased her vanity, and fulfilled her ambition, and woke up something that she said was love, to be counted as his future wife. And where lives the woman who, these gratified, is not at peace with herself and life all through?

But, since Mrs. Fairclough's arrival at the Cottage, things had been going a little awry between Millicent and her lover; and without any direct breach there had been various passages-at-arms, where the weapons on the one side had been mingled tears and fiery accusations; to which the other had opposed now the impenetrable shield of cold reserve, and now had condescended to gather up these vague accusations in one hand, to prove what mere reeds and straws they were. In all these encounters Helen stood Noel's faithful friend, and never scrupled to tell her young sister what she thought of her folly in "making a fuss about nothing"—imperiling a solid reality for the sake of a shadowy fancy, and making every one uncomfortable, as the tax to be paid to her

wounded vanity and silly jealousy. But Millicent, if good-hearted in a way, was, as we know, passionate and inconsiderate; and her jealousy and heart-burnings increased rather than diminished, in spite of all that Helen might advise or Noel himself aver.

After this little brush between the sisters had been smoothed away, Helen, in her quality of district visitor as well as elder sister and practical worker, went into the village on her rounds. It was her "day," when the sheep for whose condition she was so far responsible had to be rallied and set to rights; and as Millicent was too unsatisfactory a lamb on her own account to have the herding of others, she was left at home with her crewel-work and a novel, which were more in her way than soup-tickets or tracts; while her sister made herself hideous in her visiting costume, and a nuisance to the poor whom she went to see.

Soon after she left, the small gate at the upper end of the garden opened, and then shut with a bang, as Frank Hardisty, the rector's son, came hurriedly in.

No better heart nor thicker skull could be found in what showy talkers are so fond of calling the length and breadth of the land, than the heart and skull possessed by Frank Hardisty—once stroke in the winning university boat, and now clerk in the Foreign Office. He was the most generous, the most affectionate, the least suspi-

cious, the handsomest, the most transparent, and the most blundering young man to be met with; but every one liked him, and all said, If not clever —poor, dear Frank!—he was good; and goodness goes farther than cleverness any day. It does not; but then truth is not always the kernel of popular sayings; and in this saying is very little kernel indeed. For, of all the mischief done in the world, nine-tenths come from folly, while only one part is due to intentional evil-doing.

Millicent, small, dark, richly-colored, vivacious, was an excellent contrast to Frank Hardisty, large, lumbering, good-tempered, slow—fair and frank as a Scandinavian god, and strong as an ox of the Campagna. Perhaps it was this contrast that had fascinated him; for ever since they had been boy and girl together—though they were not much more now—Frank Hardisty had laid his heart at Millicent's feet, and Millicent, after the manner of her kind, had trampled on it. He was her dog, her slave, her footstool, her plaything; but he was constant and patient, and, if as stupid as the proverbial giant, as tenacious as the proverbial bulldog, and as good-natured as he was strong.

With him she was always at ease. Sure of her holding, she gave herself no trouble to keep him; and certain of his admiration, whatever she did or said, took no care to control the tempers and naughtinesses which brought down all sorts of rebuke on her curly head from her sister, who

scolded her soundly—and even more painful lectures from the lover who wished her to be more noble than Nature and her small-sized brains would allow. But Frank, patient, adoring, blind, accepted everything with the same unquestioning admiration; and when his dark-eyed divinity was more unreasonable than usual, only thought "what she must have suffered to have come to this!" and blamed those who had offended her, not her who had become offended.

He came to her now to wish her good-by. He was off to London to his office by the afternoon train; and he came almost too opportunely. Though Millicent had made up her quarrel with Helen, she had neither conquered her jealousy nor forgiven Noel, and she was still thinking what she could do to punish him, and above all how she could find out something against Mrs. Fairclough. She did not know that there was anything against her at all; and if there were, she had not the slightest clew to guide her. But jealousy is an ingenious kind of thing in general, and things which are not easy to find are not impossible to create.

After they had been sitting together for some time, "How I hate Mrs. Fairclough!" cried Millicent, suddenly, *à propos* of nothing.

"Why?" asked blundering Frank, who could never read between the lines, and who thought Clarissa Fairclough only second to Millicent herself for delightfulness and charm.

"Because she is a wretch!" said Millicent, with the air of one who has propounded an unanswerable argument, and explained to the fullest the knotty point of a crux.

"Yes?" said Frank, his fair, Baldur-like face broadened into a smile.

"How stupid you are, Frank!" cried Millicent, pettishly; and the smile faded away, like Baldur himself hidden under clouds, as the young fellow looked penitent and downcast.

"But tell me why you hate her?" he asked, after a pause; during which Millicent had embroidered half a daisy with vicious energy. "She seems a very unoffending person, and is always good to every one."

"She flirts with Noel," answered Millicent, a sudden wicked glance in her handsome eyes.

Frank's face changed at this. True, he loved Millicent better than himself, and cared more for her happiness than his own; but human nature has its laws, as generosity has its limits, and, if he had not resented, he had surely not rejoiced over this engagement, which had given to another the prize so long and so faithfully coveted for himself. Indeed, he scarcely liked to talk of it or to recognize it as a stable fact. For always in the depths of his heart, at the back as it were of his consciousness, lay the unspoken hope that something would happen to break it off, and transfer the girl to the only man in the world who could love her

as she deserved to be loved—and, so far, the only man in the world worthy of her.

"She is very much to blame if she does that," he said, heroically.

He thought it no harm to love Millicent for his own part, and would have taken her from Noel Thorburn at any moment if he could; but when it came to Clarissa Fairclough's interfering with Millicent's property—touching on her prerogative and making her uneasy—then he became alive to the iniquity of meddling with bespoken goods; and the sin of both Noel and the widow was evident, and not to be forgiven.

"But she does; do I not tell you so?" cried Millicent, her blood, never long cool, beginning to boil. "I am sure she is a very wicked woman, Frank! I am sure she is! I only wish I could find out something about her; for I am as sure as of my own existence that she is not what she seems to be."

"I don't know about that," began Frank, doubtfully; but Millicent stopped him shortly, sharply, as her manner was:

"She is not!" she said, with authoritative passion; and Frank succumbed.

"Well, perhaps she is not, if you say so," he answered, humbly. "I can't say it ever occurred to me myself to suspect her; but then I do not see these things very clearly."

"No, you never see anything," said Milli-

cent, contemptuously. "You are as blind as—as—"

"As a beetle," Frank added, rounding off the sentence with unruffled good-humor.

"And blinder," returned Millicent.

"Perhaps you are right—indeed, I know you are; but then you have brains for two," said Frank, glad to glorify his divinity even at the cost of his own abasement.

"At all events, I have enough to see that something is not quite straight with Mrs. Fairclough, and to feel it my duty to find out all about her. Noel ought to have his eyes opened, and be protected from her," she added, with a quasi-maternal air, not without its charm, though it had also its sting, for the poor young fellow.

"I should have thought Noel Thorburn man of the world enough to have his eyes opened, and to be able to protect himself," he said, simply, meaning no sarcasm; but on Millicent saying, peremptorily, "No, he is not; he is far too good to suspect any one, and Mrs. Fairclough is just the dangerous kind of woman to take him in!" he succumbed again, and said, "Yes."

But he could not help thinking a little ruefully, that what was virtuous simplicity and manly high-mindedness in Noel had just been snubbed in him as blind stupidity, to which even the parallel of a clumsy beetle was not sufficient. And

with the thought he sighed at the unjust apportionment of love—and Millicent Despard.

"You must find out, Frank," then said Millicent.

"But, Millicent, find out what?" he returned, with genuine distress.

For Millicent he would do much and dare all; but extracting sunbeams from cucumbers was a task no more difficult than to find out evil of a lady who lived so harmlessly, and gave so few indications of dangerous shallows anywhere, as Mrs. Fairclough, of the Cottage.

How was he to begin?—to whom apply? She had very little family history to relate, but what she had was freely bestowed on all alike. She had been born and brought up abroad; had traveled much; been married young; her father and mother were dead; so, it was to be supposed, was her husband, since he was not there and she never spoke of him; she had no brothers nor sisters, no uncles nor aunts; and the companion who lived with her, Mrs. Sutcliffe, knew no more of her past than the people at Marston—that is, no more than she had been told; which was assumed to be everything. She had been engaged in London and brought down with the rest of the baggage; and as she was a self-indulgent, sleepy, tranquil kind of soul, whose main object in life was to slip through the teeth of all harrows easily, and never use two words where one would do, she neither

sought to penetrate mysteries nor made them where they did not exist, nor gave herself or others any extra trouble whatsoever; being deeply impressed with the wisdom of letting well alone when she had got that well in hand. So that the task of tracking Mrs. Fairclough's past, and of finding out spots in her ermine and false steps in her walking, seemed wellnigh hopeless, and might have appalled a braver man than even honest Frank.

"Find out what?" repeated Millicent, snappishly. "How stupid you are, Frank! If I knew what it was, I should not ask you to find it out. But you must," she continued, assurance strengthening with her word, after the manner of impulsive people with strong convictions and woolly brains. "Remember, I rely on you; and you are the only friend I have!"—a little pathos flung into these last words.

"You know that I would do anything in the world for you, Millicent," said Frank, with effusion; his delight at being employed and trusted a little dashed by the apparent hopelessness as well as the cruelty and not over-honorable nature of his task. "But what on earth can I do in this? Whom can I ask? Where can I go? It is like looking for a pebble on the sea-shore! What can I do?"

"Find out," said Millicent; "and if you care for me as much as you pretend to do, you will."

"If I care for you!" said the poor fellow.

"Yes, if!" repeated Millicent.

"There is not much doubt of that," he answered; "never has been for the last ten years—as long as I can remember, indeed."

"Then prove it, and unmask Mrs. Fairclough," she said; and with that she put both her hands in his, in the manner of a prayer, a promise, and a caress, all in one.

And Frank Hardisty—honest gentleman as he was, and the very reverse of unfriendly to Mrs. Fairclough—was from that moment consecrated to the office of an amateur detective; pledged to prove the beautiful young widow unworthy, if he could: all, that Millicent Despard's jealous little soul might be satisfied, and some crumbs of her regard be flung for the sake of gratitude to his side.

But if Vivienne could deceive Merlin, what may not be pardoned to a youth who had no special wisdom to guide him, and whose heart had been enslaved ever since he was a big, lumbering schoolboy home for his holidays from Rugby, to whom Millicent, then a little girl, one day confided the secret of an undiscovered nut-tree in the wood, and graciously allowed him to risk his neck that she might carry home the spoil? Since then it had been always the same kind of thing. He had worshiped and she had ruled; he had done the work and she had enjoyed the results; as now,

when he was to unmask Mrs. Fairclough that she, Millicent, might be at peace with her lover, and his rival find happiness where now he had discomfort. Poor Frank! The chestnuts promised to be hard to get and hot when had; but it was his office; and though between them it was emphatically that one kissed and the other held up her cheek, yet if Millicent would but hold up her cheek, he would never weary of kissing it—for no other return than the permission!

II.

While this conversation had been going on at Oak-Tree House, where the admiral and his two daughters lived, Noel Thorburn at the Cottage was engaged in proving to Clarissa Fairclough how much better it was to work in pure colors, subtilely touched in so that the whole should blend together, rather than to mix the paints on the palette and work in, not to, results.

He was an enthusiast for art, and Mrs. Fairclough shared his tastes; while Millicent had no more knowledge how to draw a tree or a face than he had how to paint another Madonna della Seggiola. And naturally—intellectual sympathy being so strong!—the companionship of this beautiful young woman, who knew all the finest pictures in Europe, and could say where this was to

be found and where that, and could even indicate the very place on the wall where each hung, was pleasant enough to him. They had many things in common, on the basis of art; and each enjoyed what the other could say.

It was intellectual sympathy—artistic harmonies—alone which drew Noel Thorburn so frequently to the Cottage. Mrs. Fairclough might have been old and ugly, he used to think at such times when he stopped short and looked at himself and where he was drifting—or if indeed he was drifting anywhere—and he would still have found himself in that pretty and tranquilizing drawing-room six days a week, as now. It was only the paint-brush and the palette that drew him there; in no wise Nature, save as this was interpreted by Art.

And with this self-explanation he was content; disturbed neither in his conscience nor his security; and more vexed for her own sake than for his, when Millicent Despard gave way to a fit of jealousy more severe than usual, and made herself and every one else uncomfortable because Mrs. Fairclough was too lavish with her lake, and Noel Thorburn tried to teach her that shadows should be kept cool.

He was sitting now side by side with her at the table in the drawing-room where she had her painting materials, discussing methods and renderings with the passion of an enthusiast; but

unconsciously finding in the beautiful woman herself the most interesting part of the lesson.

For she was beautiful—rarely so; with a face like that of the Cenci; the same coloring of hair, skin, and eyes; the same expression of unutterable sadness, but with finer modeling of the cheeks, and a handsomer because less childish and more expressive mouth. She was, moreover, tall and graceful, and her hands were noticeably beautiful.

Noel was tall, too, but black to her ruddy gold, olive to her cream; a fine, well-built, soldierly-looking man, quiet and grave in manner; gentle in action, as real strength always is; and patient with the patience by which deep passion knows how to mask itself.

In the farthest corner of the room, placid Mrs. Sutcliffe tatted strips of useless lumber, peacefully watching the two set between her and the light; and thanking her good genius for the obstacle between them of Noel's engagement to Millicent Despard. She was a keen-witted woman in her own way, if indolent in her habits; like a cat blinking and purring in the sun, but with her eyes never fairly closed, and always aware of the bird on the bough and the mouse behind the straw. She was one who, while seeming to see nothing, sees all, and understands more of the observed game than the players themselves.

A faint flush in her usually colorless face gave Mrs. Fairclough's beauty more life and less statu-

esque repose than usually belonged to it; but Noel's raven-black hair, and eyes of a brown so dark as to be also black, were made more striking still by the increased paleness of his. He was looking at her earnestly while he talked; she looking down on her work, smiling as she listened. It was only about the colors to be seen on the hills, at their loveliest to-day; and how that farthest range was to be rendered so as to make it distant yet distinct, painting it in tenderly, yet keeping it solid. But Noel liked to talk, and Mrs. Fairclough liked to listen; and though her voice was low and her smile was sweet, surely there was no danger to be got out of a discussion respecting the local value of Naples yellow or Vandyke brown, or whether the bounding line came the hundredth part of an inch more to the side than had been drawn! Nevertheless, Mrs. Sutcliffe watched between her half-closed eyes, purring over her work, and meditating.

"After Italy, I find these colors so much less glowing," said Mrs. Fairclough, with the slightest, prettiest, daintiest Italian accent. It was a voice and an accent which somehow reminded one of fruit, as there are faces which are like flowers.

"I wish that I had met with you in Italy," said Noel; "we should have made some fine studies about Florence and the Bay of Naples."

"Very fine," she answered, quite naturally;

but she did not echo his wish that they had met, which meant a regret that they had not.

"We must often have been quite close together without knowing it," continued Noel.

"Yes, often," she assented.

"What a pity that by some happy chance we did not become acquainted there—five years ago!" he said, with almost a sigh.

"I am a fatalist," answered the widow, tranquilly as to manner; but her smile a little faded and her pretty faint flush paled.

"*À propos* of our not meeting in Italy?" with a tender kind of regretful accent.

"Yes," she said; but though her voice was not so tender as his, she meant more.

"Fatalism is too convenient a theory to be either wise or true," Noel continued, after a short pause. "It would send all our energies to sleep if acted on, and it accounts for too much."

"But there is something in it," she answered.

"Not more than there is in every theory."

"Surely, if you go by the merest accident to a place, see there the person who changes your whole life, and if he—or she—has also gone there by the merest accident, and you are introduced to each other by chance—what is that but fate?" she asked, speaking slowly but with evident intention.

"Or chance. The doctrine of chance has quite

as much to say for itself as that of fate; and the doctrine of coincidence more."

She shook her head.

"No," she said, with pretty pertinacity; "I believe in fate."

He smiled.

"Was it fate, or chance, that brought you here?" he asked.

She dipped her brush into the water unnecessarily.

"Fate," she answered.

"To be consistent, you must, of course, make but the one answer to everything," he said.

"Yes; only the one."

"In that case we come to a system in which there is no free will, no elasticity, no possible arrangement by man of his own circumstances; all is done for us, and we are mere children marshaled like puppets by a power beyond ourselves and superior to all our efforts."

"Yes; that is just what I think," the widow answered.

"So you do away with moral responsibility?—and blame for wrong-doing is as unjust as praise for virtue is undeserved?"

"We cannot help ourselves—we must," she answered quietly; but this time it was he who shook his head.

"No man of an energetic nation, or himself active by temperament and nature, would agree

with you," he said. "We feel too much the power which we have of manipulating circumstance to be fatalists. It is a doctrine which suits better women who are acted for and acted on, and men who are not in the forefront of the world's activity, than Englishmen, say, who aspire both to govern themselves and direct their generation."

"Dreams!" she answered. "No one governs. A few think that they do; but we are all mere machines, ordered by an influence which we do not understand and cannot resist."

"No, no," he said.

"Yes," she answered; "yes; and"—lifting her eyes to his—"some day you will think with me."

Her face, which had grown quite pale as she had spoken, flushed when she ended with more than the faint bloom of the first part of the interview. The conversation evidently touched her nearly; and she as evidently spoke with a meaning deeper than that conveyed by her words only. It was her own life's history by which she was skirting, and her marriage the fate to which she was alluding.

What else could it be? thought Noel, watching her face as he might have studied the Cenci in the Barberini, wishing, perhaps, that the one could live and speak to him, and that the other— Well, what of the other? What could he wish from it more than he already had, with dark-eyed Milli-

cent Despard at Oak-Tree House, not half a mile off, embroidering a morning wrapper for the time when she should be mistress of the Hall and the proud wife of its master? A man cannot have everything, and many would have said that Noel Thorburn had already more than his share, in that he held such a pretty *promessa sposa* as Millicent, and such a charming friend as Mrs. Fairclough.

After this the conversation passed on to a thousand interesting topics, whereon the two developed the most seductive harmony of taste and sentiment, and through which it seemed as if they grew nearer to each other with each moment that flew, each word that was said; and then Noel, looking at his watch, and finding that he had not left himself half an hour for Millicent Despard, took his leave hurriedly, and went away in a certain disorder that did not escape Mrs. Fairclough, who pondered on it when alone with a mingled sense of fear and delight, as now she consulted her own heart and now measured the circumstances in which both he and she stood.

But when Noel had reached the top of the lane, to the right of which lay Millicent and Oak-Tree House, and to the left Thorburn Hall and solitude, after hesitating for a moment and looking at his watch—as if looking at it could change the hour—he took the latter, and his *fiancée* was left unvisited to-day. He had meant to go to her, but somehow the task was too ungrateful to be

undertaken. He had been very happy at the Cottage. Mrs. Fairclough was the kind of woman whose society made him happy. Her gentleness pleased his taste, her sympathy soothed his nerves; she was bright-witted, and could talk on other matters besides the latest bit of local gossip or the last new novel from the library—which formed the boundary-line of poor Millicent's intellectual kingdom; and he was, moreover, getting a little weary of the perpetual scenes which the girl's petulant jealousy forced on him. Wherefore, actuated by all these considerations, he left his visit to Oak-Tree House unpaid; and Helen Despard's evening was decidedly uncomfortable in consequence.

The next day broke fair and bright, and Noel, seeming to shake himself clear from certain haunting influences good neither for himself nor others to cherish, rode off to Oak-Tree House early, not waiting for the afternoon. This was as it should be—impatience of a legitimate kind, sitting well on a handsome man whose future blessedness was centred in a piquant, changeable little face where the child resisted still the woman, and which united the fresh beauty of the one with the dawning consciousness, the stronger capacities, of the other.

He went into the drawing-room, where the two sisters were sitting, rehearsing the drama of yesterday—that is, quarreling without stint on his iniquities, Mrs. Fairclough's sins, and Milli-

cent's determination not to put up with it any longer—Helen, as usual, preaching peace, but as one crying in the wilderness and preaching in vain.

As Noel entered, Helen got up to receive him, as she always did, cordially. Sweet-natured but not personally interesting, she was one of those bits of human padding with which the world abounds, kind and good, but with more common-sense than pure intellect, and a torch-bearer for Mrs. Grundy rather than for iconoclasts or the gods; a woman born to be an elder sister or the aunt of many nephews; or if a mother, then as the wife of some dull piece of respectable mediocrity, bringing into life a brood of commonplace citizens and citizenesses, who would neither achieve glory nor come to shame, but who would keep to the lower walks of life contentedly, and do their humble work without a flaw.

"Welcome!" she said, kindly; but Millicent, sitting with bent head and flushed face, went on working diligently, and took no notice of her lover's arrival.

He went up to her smiling.

"Well?" he said pleasantly, but he knew his fate.

Still Millicent did not look up. She said, "Good-morning," instinctively, but she said it shortly, sharply, snappishly, and her needle clicked against her thimble as the symphony reëchoing her voice.

He sat down by her with perfect good-humor.

Perhaps his conscience a little reproached him and made him more than usually patient with her—and he was seldom impatient.

"Well?" he said again, after a pause, during which he had vainly tried to make her look at him and she had as pertinaciously resisted, and kept her eyes fixed on her work; "are you not going to speak to me to-day?"

"It does not seem a matter of much importance to you whether I do or not," flashed out Millicent, tears beginning to gather in her dark eyes and to dim her sight.

Helen moved a little aimlessly about the room, humming softly to herself.

"You see that it does," said Noel, "since your silence makes me unhappy."

"Unhappy!" cried Millicent, in a voice full of weak sarcasm and strong passion.

"Yes, unhappy. When I see you uncomfortable and estranged, can I be anything else?" was the reply, made softly, but wanting in the true ring all the same.

"It is your fault that I am unhappy!" returned Millicent. Her work suddenly dropped on her lap, and her tears were now falling without concealment or the effort to restrain them.

"How is it my fault?" he asked.

He knew the answer, but it was a question which had to be made—a bad moment that had to be lived through.

"You wonder at my being unhappy, when you neglect me as you do?" said Millicent. "You never come near me. You are all your time at that horrid woman's. You seem as if you quite hated me, Noel; and then you coolly wonder at my being unhappy!"

"I thought we agreed, last time, that you were a very dear little thing, and that we were to have no more doubts or jealousies—no more scenes or turmoils—and smiles only, not tears," he returned, calmly; but he gave a weary little sigh as he spoke. He remembered the tender grace, the sweet and soothing calm, of the fair woman at the Cottage; and these scenes with Millicent, so constantly recurring, seemed so childish and so wearisome! They heated the atmosphere, and robbed it of all sense of freedom or repose.

"Yes, you sigh when you are with me. You treat me as a child that you have to keep in good-humor with a few soft words—a few sugar-plums—and then you sigh!" cried Millicent, passionately. "How do you expect me to bear your cruelty, your neglect, Noel? How long do you think this kind of thing is to go on? It has gone on too long as it is, and I am broken-hearted!" weeping.

"Hush! hush, Millicent!" said Helen, from the distance, rapidly calculating the chances of a proud man's temper and the price to be paid for a silly little girl's sillier outburst. "Noel, do not take

any notice of what she says. She is cross and hysterical, and makes herself more miserable than any one else."

"I can see that she is out of sorts," said Noel; "but I do not want to make her unhappy. If she wants to be free from me, do you think I would keep her against her will? Impossible! If I only knew what she does really want, I would do my best to please her—within the limits of my own freedom and self-respect."

These last words were said with a sudden stiffening of voice and manner—of all his expressions of mood that which Helen most dreaded.

"You must be patient with her," she said. "She is only a child yet, and though tiresome and unreasonable enough, still she has a good heart, and will come right in the end."

"I do not want your advocacy, Helen!" cried Millicent, angrily. "I am neither a child to be coaxed into good-humor, nor an ill-tempered half-maniac to be forgiven because I am not a responsible being, as you try to make me out. I know exactly what I feel, and what I think is my due; and if you and Mr. Thorburn do not respect me, at least I will respect myself."

"If I do anything that hurts your self-respect—" began Noel.

"If!" cried Millicent.

He rose from his chair, looking stern.

Millicent, who had been secretly applauding

herself for her spirit, stole one glance up at his face, and began to be frightened. She wanted to quarrel—to give vent to her dissatisfaction—to show her passion, and to bring him to her knees; but she did not want to offend and perhaps lose him. She was fond of him in her way, and her future position as his wife was too brilliant to forfeit lightly. Still, between temper and calculation, jealousy and common-sense, in a girl of her nature, there was not much doubt which would be chosen; and she fulfilled the law of her being to the letter.

He stood before her for a few minutes, his face stern, his attitude one of offended pride and cold expectation united. He was waiting for her to make some sign that should set the lines of their future relations, either for good or evil, continuance or rupture.

"You know you do behave to me shamefully!" began Millicent.

"I do not know," said Noel, hastily, emphasizing the negative.

"You do!" repeated Millicent. "You neglect me for Mrs. Fairclough in the most open manner. All the place is talking about it—and a woman, too, that you scarcely know, and who may be anything—a mere adventuress, for aught we know."

"Millicent!" cried Helen.

"Understand me once for all," said Noel. "I

will not have Mrs. Fairclough's name mixed up in these silly quarrels. I have said so once before, and you know that I mean what I say. Say to me and of me what you will, but her name shall be kept sacred!"

"Yes, *her* name is to be kept sacred! She is to be cared for and protected on all sides, and I may be spoken of by every one as a girl whose lover neglects her for another woman; but I am to bear it all in silence, and not say a word! She is everything, and I am nothing!"

Millicent said this with that irritating manner, half-passionate, half-sarcastic, by which people know how to make themselves so intensely disagreeable. She was an adept at the art, and often put it into requisition.

"This has lasted long enough," then said Noel. "I must leave you now, Millicent. When you want to see me again, send for me; and when you send for me, tell me how you wish that we should meet. Our future relations rest with you."

"Millicent, apologize—tell him you are sorry!" cried Helen.

She had better have held her tongue. Left to herself, Millicent would probably have made one of her pretty, penitent, coaxing advances, which always subdued Noel and won his forgiveness; but her sister's exhortation roused her pride, and she turned away her head with a naughty, child-

ish toss, indicative of anything rather than penitence.

"Good-by, then, till you send for me," repeated Noel.

"Till I send for you! It will be a long good-by, if this is to be the only thing to break it!" cried Millicent. "I am not in the habit of sending for any one, least of all gentlemen who do not come of their own accord."

"Good-by, Helen," said Noel, disdaining reply. Why argue with a petulant child? "I must depend on you to bring your sister to reason, or to inform me of her unreasonableness."

"Oh, it will all come right!" cried Helen, cheerfully. "It is only an April shower, Noel, and things will soon clear themselves. I know her."

"And I do not," he returned; "having believed her to be a rational person, and that she loved me."

On which he left the room, feeling more heavily weighted with the pain of life self-inflicted, and the burden of its mistakes willfully undertaken, than he had ever felt before; knowing now only too clearly that he neither loved Millicent truly, nor wished to make her his wife, but that he was bound by his promise, and, as a man of honor, compelled to fulfill his word when the time fixed on came; knowing, too—which perhaps was the worst of all to him—that he was not treating her well; that he was, if not quite playing a

double game, yet not quite playing an honest one. If only she would give him up of her own free will!—if only he had not let himself be caught by a pretty face and a childishly-engaging manner, nor suffered himself to think that admiration meant love, and passing pleasure solid sympathy!

But it was of no use to lament over the things which were done. He was a man, not a child; and of his free will he had engaged himself to Millicent Despard, and he must hold by his own work and make good his own words. Perhaps, had Mrs. Fairclough come to Marston six months earlier, the admiral's pretty young daughter would never have been his affianced wife.

He thought this out to himself in unmistakable words as he rode slowly through the lane. He was tired of subterfuges, and suddenly tore off the veil from his own soul and confessed the truth, which he had long felt but had never until now recognized; and when he came to the well-known fork, he turned his horse's head in the direction of the Cottage with a certain sense of desperation—like a half-ruined gambler risking one more stake in that perilous game, where he might lose all, but could scarcely win back what would make life desirable or honest.

Soon all these thoughts were swept away like mist-wreaths when the sun is up, and he was sitting with Mrs. Fairclough where he sat yesterday, studying now the shadows on the hills, and now

the lights on the fair face that was so like that of the Cenci, as it bent over the table or lifted itself to look into his; but in all its lights and phases, sweet, soft, sympathetic, soothing—how unlike the fiery fitfulness of pretty, childish, mindless Millicent Despard!

"Oh, that I had been wise in time!" thought Noel Thorburn, bitterly, as he covered his eyes with his hands and shut his lips close, like a man stifling an expression of pain.

III.

If one of Millicent's gravest faults was her petulant jealousy acting on an ungoverned kind of temper, one of her sweetest virtues was her quick repentance. She was silly and undignified, but, as Helen said, she was good at heart, and after a time was sure to work round to the right point. Her errors were of a kind to mend themselves by age and experience; but the substantial good was a possession for all time; and even now, if it did not always keep her straight, yet it minimized the evil by making her penitent and ashamed—which was so far a gain.

So soon as Noel had left, the reaction set in, and if she could have called him back and humbled herself, she would; but the moment was lost, and she was obliged to bear with the results of

her own action. As Helen had told her, she was the weaker of the two, and though not quite fairly treated by her lover, as fair treatment between betrothed people goes, yet it was undeniably the wiser thing either to end with courage what she could not bear with patience, or to bear cheerfully what she could not end effectually. These interludes of passion and jealousy and temper were neither one thing nor the other, and spoiled more than her return of good-humor and penitence could repair.

Not being able to bring back Noel at this moment, and not daring to go to his house, she wrote a broken-hearted and affectionate letter, beseeching him to forgive her, and to come and tell her so, if not to-day then certainly to-morrow—to take her to his heart again, and to be once more the dear good Noel whom she loved and cared only to please; for he knew how much she loved him, she said—with heavy blots made by her fast-falling tears—and how miserable she was when she had displeased him.

It was a warm, impulsive, silly letter, but good-hearted and well-meaning; and Millicent felt happier when she had written it, and as if she had successfully conquered the evil spirit within her, and once more come out into the light of reasonable virtue and brave good sense. Then, in her character of a repentant Xantippe, she proposed to her sister to go and call on Mrs. Fairclough; intend-

ing by this act of grace to apologize mentally for having believed that Noel Thorburn was more interested in her than need be for strict friendship, and that she was less careful to repress his attentions than was right for strict justice. Also, she wanted to include in this unspoken apology a retraction of what she had said to Frank Hardisty about the possible doubtfulness of the fair widow's untold circumstances, and to rescind, as she would, that commission of inquiry to which she had bound him. She had a great deal to be sorry for, the weak-brained, warm-hearted, pretty, and impulsive child; but, after all, if unwise to shoot her bolt as she had done, her shaft had struck not so very far from the centre!

Helen, glad to welcome her little sister's return to sanity, assented both to the sending of the note and to the call on Mrs. Fairclough; so the two set out after luncheon, and, after dropping the note at the Hall, went on to the Cottage, where they found Mrs. Fairclough at home.

Sitting at the table, side by side like fellow-workers of the closest kind, the sisters fell upon the two artist-friends with a sense of finding out what it was desired should not be seen. And they —these fellow-workers, sitting here in such suggestive community of taste and occupation—had they as much the feeling of being caught as these others had of discovery? Who can tell? Mrs. Fairclough's Cenci-like face did certainly take on

its ordinary low cream-color a deep if swiftly-passing crimson, while her manner had the subtilest possible tinge of embarrassment; but as Noel stood up, he looked only rather paler than usual, and was neither embarrassed nor moved in any way whatsover. It was an unlucky meeting for Millicent's new-born virtue of repentance and desire for general peacefulness; as damaging as a rude touch to a house of cards; and, as she came forward, following her sister, her face, which had been prettily caressing, tenderly coaxing, gradually flushed into the angry excitement so fatally well known; and the large eyes, which had been so full of softened pleading, swept over Noel to Mrs. Fairclough with unmistakable disdain, as if she would and she could have swept them off from the face of the earth. The restless and unsteady pendulum of her mind had swung back even beyond its former beat; and, because of that short interval of regret, she was even more angry with Noel and the widow than before.

Her good intentions were like thistle-down blown by the winds. She apologize?—she humble herself to Noel, or speak softly to Mrs. Fairclough? —she write to Frank Hardisty, and tell him not to set on foot those inquiries which were to track out the snake in the grass and unmask the impostor? No! she was the injured, not the injurer; and if reparation and apology were to be made, they were to be made to, and not by, her.

To the courteous speeches of the pretty widow she replied with such incivility as could not be mistaken or explained; to Noel's grave kindness she opposed a harsh and jerking feverish kind of anger, that seemed as if it could keep no terms with appearance—as if it must burst forth or she should die. She made herself as disagreeable as she knew how; and, as has been said, she knew the art from Alpha to Omega; while poor Helen sat on thorns, and Noel wondered if the visit would end without such a fracture as could never be mended again.

Looking from the pouting, flushed, and angry face of his affianced bride to the calm and statuesque loveliness of his friend, he thought that, although all men are blind where women are concerned, surely he had been the blindest of all; and that when he had asked Millicent Despard to be his wife, he had been struck like Elymas for a sin as great as his! Had he ever been really fascinated by her? It seemed so strange that he had once believed himself sincerely in love, and that she would make him a passable wife and an endurable life-companion! Still, he was bound, unless she of her own free will released him; and what chance was there of that?

He left his place by the table and sat down by her, doing his best to bring back her good-humor; but the more he tried to soothe her by his voice, his manner, his attentions, the less she would be

mollified. She was full of the perversities of girlhood, in spite of the better characteristics latent and to be at some future time developed; and enjoyed the state and dignity of showing temper to a man of whom, in the ordinary run of things, she was a little afraid. It gave her an artificial sense of supremacy which pleased her, and she carried her privilege to the last boundary in any way permissible.

After this kind of thing had gone on for some time—an interminable time, as it seemed to all—during which Mrs. Sutcliffe had blinked and purred and taken in the situation; Mrs. Fairclough had talked to Helen on all manner of gracious nothings; and Helen had answered with as much real cordiality and feigned unconcern as her hostess had assumed, but always with a consciousness of the home reckoning to be made when she and Millicent should be alone; after Noel had first tried to conciliate Millicent, who would not be conciliated, and then had taken refuge in commonplaces, to which she had barely deigned a reply, thinking them even more heartless and insulting than the rest—the visit came to an end; and with this ending was born Millicent's new resolve. The cup was full, and had now run over; and the drops fell like acid on a bond blotting out the words "I promise" forever.

She was very quiet and self-centred all the way home, thereby upsetting Helen's calculations

and making her really frightened; for she knew that more danger hid in this brooding quietness of wrath than in the most ferocious outbursts of temper with such a girl as Millicent. It was not like her to be amiably savage; and she was amiable now, though decidedly savage. Who could look into her face, overshadowed with that moral thunder-cloud, and not see the truth of things? Who, indeed? Not Helen, whose instinct of danger was only too true. For, as soon as they got home, Millicent went to her own room, and there wrote her last and final words to Noel. She meant to say just a few—short, sharp, and to the purpose; but the curse of verbal fluidity was on her, as on some other women, and she never knew when to stop.

"Dear Mr. Thorburn," she said; and she spoiled two sheets of paper before she finally settled on this as her mode of address, being torn first between "Dear Sir," and "Dear Noel," then between "Sir," and nothing at all; but finally fixing on "Dear Mr. Thorburn," as the coldest and most estranged, because least exaggerated and most conventional.

"Dear Mr. Thorburn: After what I have seen and felt to-day, I desire that our engagement should be brought to an end. I no longer hold myself engaged to you, nor you in any way bound to me; and henceforth you are free to carry your attentions where you like. I shall tell papa,

and Helen, and everybody, that I have broken off with you, and I shall tell them all why; for you have treated me with unheard-of insult and cruelty, and if you think that I am the kind of girl to accept quietly whatsoever kind of treatment any one chooses to give me, you are very much mistaken. I hope that I have too much pride to stoop to the degrading position that you want to put me in; and if you do not love me, at least you shall respect me. You have thrown away a faithful heart, and one that would have loved you all your life; and some day, perhaps, you will find out the mistake you have made, and be sorry for it. I wish you no other ill than this, but I think you will have this. Yours sincerely, MILLICENT DESPARD," in a very bold, big, clumsy hand.

So that bubble collapsed, and left only a tear behind it; and henceforth Noel Thorburn and Millicent Despard were two, and the misfitting relations between them were at an end "forever."

When Noel got home, he received both these letters from his fiery, impulsive *fiancée*, written within two hours of each other—the one from the torrid the other from the frozen zone; and after a natural flush of wounded pride at being so decisively thrown off by the girl whose love for him had been her strongest hold over him and his half-unconscious source of pride, he turned to his liberty with a sign of relief—free now to love where

his soul had found its mate, his happiness its home.

Meanwhile Millicent, who would have been far happier had she never been taught to write, scrawled off another letter to Frank Hardisty, addressed to the Foreign Office, where he would be to-morrow morning. She reminded him of his promise to find out all about Mrs. Fairclough—that all meaning, of course, something grossly and undeniably evil; and then she told him that she had broken off her engagement with Noel Thorburn because of that awfully wicked woman—and she wanted him to find out what he had lost, and to be sorry that he had deserted her for such a horrid creature. It was all the revenge she meant to take, and it was quite a lawful one; and she relied on her dear Frank, her kind, good friend, who had always treated her well and never gone against her, to help her just this once, when she would never bother him again. She was very unhappy, and he, Frank, could quite understand that no girl would like being put in such a position—deserted like this, she so well known as she was, for a perfect stranger who might be anything in the world for what they knew; and who was, she was sure, a horrid wretch somehow! Then she wound up with a few sweet words to Frank on his own account—words which made the young fellow's fair face beam like a god's, and which made him feel willing and strong

enough for any peril, any discomfort, so long as he could win her approval or give her pleasure.

If women like to make men's hearts their foot-stools, and to be able to treat their puppets with disdain, sure that they will come back to the lure so soon as it is thrown out, Millicent Despard owed no little gratitude to Frank Hardisty for gratifying both these propensities as he did; for no man was more the slave of a woman's humor, more like a docile dog bound to fetch and carry and obey without a murmur, whatever the command, than was he. Not only his cloak, but his very body, he would have laid down before her, that she might keep her dainty feet clean and dry; not only the cup of water would he have taken from his own parched lips that hers might be refreshed, but he would have given her his very life-blood, and felt honored that she would accept her own well-being at the expense of his existence. It was one of those dumb, quiet, intense loves which go far and last long, but which make very little show in life; and Millicent herself, though she traded on his devotion, did not know how deep it went.

This letter made him very glad, if also sorry: glad for himself, that his chance was still alive; but sorry for her, that she had suffered and been mortified. He did not believe that she loved Noel Thorburn. He could not. Loving her as he did for his own part, it seemed impossible to him that

her heart should be given to any one else, though she might have given her fancy, and accepted an offer which was grateful to her pride and ambition.

All this poor clumsy-brained Frank was generous enough to understand and accept ; but he felt as if the magnet of his own love were too strong to suffer her heart to be given to another. And now it was small wonder and less blame if the way suddenly made clearer for his own chance gave him happiness, even though she had suffered.

He relieved his mind, however, by a few harsh epithets applied to Noel ; and then he put the letter into his pocket, and stumbled through his work with even less sharpness than usual, and more woolly-headedness than was looked for as of the nature of things.

When his work was done, and the sacred hour of four had struck, Frank went off to his club and sat down to think. He had this thing to do : he had to find out all about Mrs. Fairclough ; but how to begin, and where ? A clerkship in the Foreign Office does not include intimate relations with the ministers and embassadors or even the consuls abroad ; and three months' residence in Italy for the purpose of qualifying himself to pass an examination in the language does not give a man the power of Asmodeus, and take off the roofs of private houses that he may see what is going on within. Nor is London exactly the kind

of place where to begin a search into the antecedents of an unknown lady lately settled in a country place, and living a quiet life with perfect propriety. What could he do? How could he begin? No lady of romance ever gave her knight a harder task, and no prince of fairy-tale, who can win his bride only by the present of a bottle full of singing water, or by an amulet from off the brow of a terrible magician, had a much harder task before him than had Frank Hardisty of the Foreign Office, when told to find out all about Mrs. Fairclough, under pain of Millicent Despard's everlasting displeasure, but with the hope, should he succeed, of even more than her mere pleasure.

He was sitting there with his head in his hand, when George Gabriel came up, and with him a dark, handsome, well-dressed man with a ribbon in his button-hole, and a general look of seeing life and enjoying himself regardless of expense and consequences. He was introduced to Frank as "il Marchese Salvatore Capozzi, lately come to England from Naples;" and Frank, who had had a "good time" in that bright city, was glad both to brush up his acquaintance with the old issimos and conjunctives, though the marchese spoke English perfectly, and to ask questions about the Chiaia and the Museum, Posilippo and the Toledo, as if great cities had a trick of dissolving into thin air, and principal streets were taken down and rebuilt like so many toy houses of Nuremberg.

He found the Italian a very pleasant, easy-going kind of person, with that wonderful grace of manner and natural ease characteristic of the whole nation, but especially of the south; and he found, too, that other characteristic—the assumption of ingenuous simplicity and spontaneity which masks the sharpest intellect and the most acute suspicion of any people in the world. But the mask was wonderfully well made, and fitted close; and Frank, who never saw deeper into the mile-stone before him than the surface-polish and the engraved letters, accepted George Gabriel's friend as he had long ago accepted George himself, and before half an hour had passed was ready to swear to his good qualities all tied together in a bunch like so many love-apples.

After a little time spent in making the first approaches, when the Italian had measured Frank and Frank had not so much as verified one inch of the Italian, the three young men went off to Greenwich to dine; as a thing to be done for the amusement and edification of a benighted foreigner who has nothing but the sun and sky, a few common kinds of fruits, and a lot of doubtful vegetables for his portion; while we English, salt of the earth as we are in ourselves, have the supreme of everything—from coal-mines to peaches, and from manufactures to whitebait.

The three young men talked and laughed and enjoyed themselves after the manner of young

men with money to spend, and the high spirits of both youth and health to make the method of spending it pleasant. And then Frank remembered Mrs. Fairclough and Millicent's letter, with its desire.

He asked the new acquaintance, this Marchese Capozzi, of Naples, if he had ever met a Mrs. Fairclough in Italy—the country being small and everybody knowing everybody, whether the one lives in Milan and the other at Palermo, as if both were mixed up together in the same circle of the same town ; just as everybody is assumed to know everybody in India, sinking the Presidencies ; and as North and South Australia are interchangeable terms, like adjacent parishes within a morning's walk of each other.

"Mrs. Fairclough?" answered the Italian. "No. Who is she? What of her? Where did she live? What is she like?" rapidly.

"She is a very beautiful woman, if that is any guide," laughed Frank, a little ashamed of his vagueness ; for when he came to dredge and plumb, what did he know of this lovely lady who had suddenly come to Marston? Absolutely nothing ; and he had no indications to give whereby she might be traced. "I know no more than this," he continued : "she is a Mrs. Fairclough, an Englishwoman, who has lived, I think, all her life abroad ; a widow with no children—and that is all."

"No, I do not know the name at all," answered Capozzi; "but if she is beautiful she can be easily traced, for she must have been well known in Italy, wherever she has lived. We are not so indifferent to beauty as report says you Englishmen are," laughing in his turn, and showing a whole row of small square teeth and the most good-tempered mouth in the world. The eyes, though, were sharper. "What is she like?"

"Tall, fair, with golden-brown hair—a very lovely creature indeed."

"The description is too general. It would do for half the English signorine who come to Italy. They are all tall, fair, and with golden-brown hair. A dark beauty is an anomaly among them, and creates unheard-of enthusiasm."

"Well, I can tell you nothing more," said Frank; then musing, he added, after a moment's pause: "Oh! I tell you what she is like—the Cenci, in the Barberini Palace, at Rome."

"Fairclough? Fairclough?" said Salvatore, lowering his eyes. "No, I do not know her; but I remember an Englishwoman in Italy who was exactly like the Cenci; only"—raising his eyes with a sudden, sharp look that shot like a flame, while he laughed again, and showed all his teeth beneath his full, flexible, pleasure-loving lips—"her name was not Fairclough."

IV.

Frank Hardisty found the Marchese Capozzi, or Salvatore, as he affectionately desired to be called, the most charming companion in the world. Without being in any way servile, he was always gracious, good-humored, and complaisant; pleased with everything, and accepting life as he found it in London without a murmur.

To be sure, he wore a heavy, fur-lined cloak, though it was August, and laughed at the pretense of an English sun, which he said was neither so bright nor so warm as the Italian moon; to be sure, too, he made wry faces over the peaches, which he swore tasted of smoke and the stove; but as he was perfectly sweet-tempered with it all, and young men do not resent chaff when accompanied by exuberant spirits, abundant laughter, and all manner of graceful excuses which disarm national self-love and do not rouse personal contempt, these little discrepancies of sentiment passed smoothly enough, and Frank bore with Salvatore's "scherzi" as he with Frank's chaff, and were none the less friends in consequence.

Not a day passed that the young men did not meet, with or without George Gabriel, the original introducer, but now left far behind in the running made so briskly by these other two; and in a very short time Frank had laid bare the whole

position of affairs at Marston, and made the Italian as much master of the details as he was himself. The young Norse-god was but a poor imitator of Loki, and as little a disciple of Macchiavelli ; and to set him to manage a delicate bit of diplomacy was about as harmonious an assignment of functions as to embroider a dainty fabric with cart-ropes.

The Italian, astute of intellect, frank and ingenuous of manner, wound the Foreign Office clerk round his little finger, and pumped him dry before the young fellow knew where he was. He got the whole map of the country from beginning to end, and understood exactly how things were.

A beautiful widow, of unimpeachable conduct and unknown antecedents, by name Fairclough, settled in a quiet country place, with a companion engaged in London, and knowing nothing more of her employer than the people did of their neighbor ; been there some six months ; had lived much, nay, all her life, abroad ; had been married abroad —to Mr. Fairclough—also of unknown family, profession, social status, personal history ; had lost her husband and her parents, let us suppose by Roman fever—that does as well for a supposition as anything else—and this also abroad ; was beautiful and like the Cenci ; had fascinated the great prize of the place, who, indeed, would have been a very fair prize in the matrimonial market anywhere, and who, for her sake, had deserted his

own lawful love and broken off his engagement—though this last fact did not specially trouble Frank Hardisty, if it angered him for the young lady's sake, and as a slight cast on one whom gods might have been proud to own—as the marchese soon found out. The question now remaining was, Would Mr. Noel Thorburn marry the widow?—if so, when?—and who was she?

All this was got from the handsome, good-natured, blundering lad, with his thick wits and honest intentions, without the least trouble or suspicion; and as Salvatore promised to lend his aid in finding out all about the widow, to whom he said he thought he had a clew, Frank congratulated himself on his good fortune, and held that he had done a good day's work when he had fallen in with the Marchese Capozzi and made him his friend and confidant.

Not that he liked the thought of being the means, at first hand or second, of injuring Mrs. Fairclough. Quite the contrary. Had there been no Millicent Despard, it is more than likely that he would have carried his honest homage to the Cottage as faithfully as he now carried it to Oak-Tree House. But Millicent was supreme, as things stood, with him and his heart; and if she desired him to beat out the snakes from the grass where she swore she heard them rustle, or unearth the tigers from the jungle where she was sure she saw their eyes glaring through the break

in the brushwood, why he, Frank Hardisty, her slave and dog, was bound to obey her at any cost, how much soever he might pity the poor snake which was not venomous, or believe that the deadly tiger was nothing but a harmless little kitten.

And, after all, it would not be his fault if the stranger's history turned out shaky at the corners. Not that it would—he felt sure of that—and took comfort from the thought that Mrs. Fairclough was straight and on the square throughout—a "candida columba" whose unsullied whiteness inquiry could only make more manifest. He was sure of it, he said to himself again and again; but even if a miracle should be wrought, and the dove of silver-seeming prove to be only a crow artificially whitened when all was known, even then it might be his sorrow to have been made the instrument of detection, but it would not be his crime; and the neighborhood ought to be protected and Millicent avenged.

All the same he felt as if he had committed himself to some dark and dangerous course whereof he knew neither the issue nor the relations—as if he had taken an oath and signed away his liberty to some secret society, where he would be swept away into murder and rebellion at the will of the members, and find his name gibbeted with criminals before he knew where he was—when the marchese, looking mysterious and

confidential, told him that he had placed the whole thing in the hands of one of the secret police whom he happened to meet here in London, and that he would soon lay the threads of what he believed would prove to be a diabolical plot between the fingers of his good friend, his caro Francesco. He had a lead, he said, which only wanted following up to make it clear, supposing his hypothesis as to the true personality and real history of the widow should prove to be correct. When he said this, Frank had that sudden sickness at his heart which every one feels who has taken the first downward and irretrievable step on the road of evil to himself and wrong-doing to others.

Soon after this the Italian left London, writing a short note to Frank, in which he said that he had gone down to Liverpool on business connected with the shipping interests of Naples, and that he should not be in town again for a few days. When he returned, he would see his caro Francesco without loss of time, and by then should have something definite to tell him of the Fair Mystery. He expected letters from Italy which would quash or confirm the hypothesis of which he had spoken before, and matters would then be so far advanced, so far cleared, that it would be one thing or the other—yes or no. Either she was the person whom he believed her to be, or else she was some one quite different; and to

clear the ground, even by a negative, was so much gained.

With this letter Frank was fain to be content; but he wrote to Millicent, and told her that he had a friend who thought he knew all about Mrs. Fairclough, and that in a few days he hoped to send her a biography, written on official paper, and duly stamped and sealed.

"And then I shall be revenged," said Millicent, viciously; "and Noel will be ashamed of himself."

"Perhaps not," answered Helen, gravely. "You know nothing whatever against this poor creature; and, even if there is anything against her, have you done a womanly thing, Milly, in setting Frank Hardisty, and perhaps the police, at work to hunt her down when she thinks that she is safe? I wish you had left it alone!"

"And let her marry Noel Thorburn?—let him bring a horrid creature here into the midst of our society, and we obliged to meet her at dinners and everything? I wonder at you, Helen! I should have thought you had better principles!" cried Millicent, virtuously indignant.

"I have the best of all," answered her sister. "Let well alone, and do not meddle with things which don't belong to you."

"But they do belong to me," said Millicent, passionately. "Noel's shameful treatment of me, I suppose, counts for something?—or do you

think him such a superior person, and Mrs. Fairclough such an angel, that they may behave as they like, and I without the right even to complain?"

"I think my little sister a great goose," said Helen, serenely; "which you will say is no news."

"No," said Millicent, bursting into fiery tears; "you have always hated and despised me, Helen, and no one in the world cares for me, except poor Frank."

"Which last speech justifies my opinion, my dear," replied Helen; and, on this, peace was an unknown quantity between the sisters for the next hour and a half by the clock.

It was about this time that a strange adventure befell Mrs. Sutcliffe—at least, it passed for an adventure in a country place where a brood of chickens was an event that made its mark on the day's chronicles, and the presence of a camp of gypsies in the lane a circumstance as terrifying to the nerves of the ladies as if a troop of Cossacks or Bashi-Bazouks had been reported marauding through the land. The adventure was a mandolin-player—a handsome, clean, swarthy, well-dressed mandolin-player, in a slouched soft-felt hat with a peacock's feather stuck in the side, and his trim, well-built figure, clothed in dark-green velveteen, covered by a large, loose, fur-lined cloak. He certainly was a very striking and superior-looking person for an "itinerant musician;" and

Mrs. Sutcliffe, a fair, fat, florid woman, who had once been pretty, wondered if a romance were possibly behind his spacious cloak, and if—she scarcely knew what; but her thoughts wove themselves into a confused pattern of conjecture and possibility, and troublesome little secrets of her present employer's past life cropping up like weeds which a gardener has only cut down and covered up, not destroyed; so that she was prepared for anything, as she said afterward, divinely and supernaturally illumined as to the fact that there was something for which to be prepared.

The man with the mandolin stopped and spoke to this fair, fat, florid lady, walking slowly down the lane. He knew a little English, he said, and spoke well what he did know, as if he knew it better than he allowed. At all events, it was enough for a conversation that did not touch on ethics or literature, and that was bounded by a few elementary questions and almost monosyllabic answers. Mrs. Sutcliffe offered him a penny, and he took it with a gracious smile and a low bow, as he removed his crushed felt hat and showed a handsome black and curly head—more like a gentleman's well-ordered curls than a strolling mandolin-player's unkempt locks; and then he asked her about the country, for he had lost himself, he said, and wanted to get to London—from which great centre he was full a hundred miles out of the direct line altogether. He said, too, that he had heard

of a good lady who lived somewhere about here, and who had been in his own country; and as he wanted some one to write home for him to his mother, he would be so glad to find her!

Mrs. Sutcliffe made for answer—meeting those clear and glittering eyes, looking so sharply into hers, with that sleepy, blinking, half-shut glance which made her look as if she hardly understood what was said, and saw no farther than a hand-breadth before her—that she was sure the good lady in question would do her best to help a countryman; and then she told the man to go up the road and turn to the right, when he would come to a house grown over with ivy, when he was to stop and ask to see Mrs. Fairclough.

"Mrs. Fairclough!" he answered, pronouncing the name with commendable facility, seeing that this must have been the first time of hearing or speaking it, and our English words not being especially easy to the soft Italian mouth. "Will she write for me to mamma?"

"Yes, I am sure she will," said Mrs. Sutcliffe. "She is a very kind lady, and you are next to being her countryman."

"Not Italian?"

"No—almost, not quite."

"Grazie! I will come," said the Italian, briskly; and just then Mrs. Fairclough and Noel Thorburn passed the head of the lane, returning home from their ride.

The mandolin-player looked up from under his broad-leafed hat, and gazed at them narrowly. He laughed as they passed—a soft, musical laugh, that somehow had an echo not quite so musical as itself. Mrs. Sutcliffe winked her fat eyelids, and put on an expression of surprise.

"Ah!" he said, joyously; "I laughed because I could see that beautiful lady had been in my country."

"It was rather far off to see that," said Mrs. Sutcliffe, "unless you had known her beforehand."

"The heart speaks when the eyes are blind," said the Italian, laying his hand on his heart; and Mrs. Sutcliffe was more than ever convinced that she had come upon the trail of a mystery and an adventure, and that this well-dressed mandolin-player with the white hands and well-brushed hair was a somebody—Heaven alone knew who—in disguise, and that his coming would spring a mine at the feet of Mrs. Fairclough—whether for good or evil remained to be seen. It could be of no evil to herself—Mrs. Emma Sutcliffe—personally, which was the main consideration with her at all times. The young widow must have a companion, whatever happened outside marriage; which, as things were, was not very likely, for Noel was engaged, and no one else was in the lists—and she would never meet with one more fitted to the situation, and less likely to bore

her or give her offense, than the one whom she had now.

"Of that I am sure," thought Mrs. Sutcliffe, complacently, feeling that she had in her pocket the exact measure of Mrs. Fairclough's foot, and knew to a nicety the touch required on the leading rein.

Still, this man might be troublesome, she thought again; though, to be sure, he might be only an adventurer—or a revelation: in which case that measure would fit more exactly than before, the touch on the leading rein would be firmer, and her own position would be consolidated in proportion to the discovery of shaky corners and loose ends in the widow's past history. For the sleepy-eyed companion was a woman who had knocked about the world so long that she had knocked off all repugnance to evil, whatsoever it might be, only regarding it as a circumstance which told for the discoverer and against the doer, like a false move in chess or the wrong suit discarded.

With which thoughts and speculations she amused herself till she came to the house whither she was bound, carrying some toothsome contributions from the Cottage larder to an invalid, and receiving as her own the thanks which, had help to the poor been left to her to give, would have had scant cause to be said.

It was rather late when the companion got

home. Mrs. Fairclough was already dressing for dinner, and Mrs. Sutcliffe had only just time enough to make her own toilet before the five minutes' bell rang, when she was expected to be at her post in the drawing-room—at all events, when visitors were dining here. And a visitor was dining at the Cottage this evening—Mr. Noel Thorburn, who had returned with the widow, and staid, partly because of a piteous story which he had made up about his kitchen range, which he seemed to think was the same thing as the kitchen chimney, and which had a complication of misfortunes that made a rational dinner an impossibility, and the Christian virtue of hospitality and giving to eat a necessity—from some one. And as Noel let the widow plainly understand that he expected this Christian virtue at her hands, and as she believed in fate, she had taken the hint, and invited him ; and he had accepted the invitation, and come.

He had something to say to this beautiful and bewitching likeness of the Cenci, which must be said soon, or life would become too difficult to him. It could not be said on horseback, and—the August evenings were sweet and soft and odorous. He was sorry for Millicent, of course ; but he had no desire to go back on that mistake, and he had a new path to follow. Of her own free will the girl had released him ; and he had accepted her surrender with even more gratitude than her ac-

ceptance of his offer had given him pleasure. It had been a mistake ; he saw that now ; and now he wanted to forget that he had ever made it, as well as all the pain and confusion and disturbance which it had caused him.

Thus it was impossible for Mrs. Sutcliffe to tell her employer anything of the adventure which had befallen her before the meal, and it was a *bonne bouche* during it which she thought should not be lost.

"You are going to have a visit, my dear," she said to Mrs. Fairclough, with a broad smile.

She was one of those fat, comfortable souls who say "my dear" easily, and always to the young. It was her manner of purring.

"Am I?" said Mrs. Fairclough. "From whom?"

"That is more than I can tell you," answered Mrs. Sutcliffe, still smiling ; "but he is a countryman of yours, who wants you to write a letter to his mother. So strange to be so ignorant, you know!"

"How—a countryman? Is he an Englishman?" asked the widow, looking at her companion with her full, steady gaze. Of late she had begun to question the true ring of that fat, blinking, comfortable soul.

"No—an Italian," she answered, her face expressing surprise at the doubt.

"But I am not an Italian," returned Mrs. Fair-

clough, gravely. "I have been a great deal abroad, but I pride myself on being an Englishwoman. Certainly, I am not an Italian!"

She looked involuntarily at Noel when she said this, and Noel looked at her and smiled. He liked both the repudiation and the assertion.

"But who is this stranger?" asked Mrs. Fairclough, after a short pause. "Where have you seen him, and what do you know of him?"

"I met him in the lane," said Mrs. Sutcliffe, drinking her wine and looking at the widow.

"Well—and then? What does it all mean?"

"That is more than I can say. All that I know is, he is a remarkably handsome man, so clean and well dressed, and just like a gentleman, my dear!—with hands and nails and shirt-cuffs like a prince! He asked me if you did not live somewhere near here—"

"I?" interrupted Mrs. Fairclough, who had grown deadly, strangely pale. "Did he know me?—know me by name?"

"Yes," answered Mrs. Sutcliffe, shooting wide of the literal truth; "he knew your name, and asked for you by it."

Mrs. Fairclough said nothing, but she pushed away her plate with the food untasted, and for the moment swayed in her chair as if she would have fallen.

"It was the oddest thing in the world," continued Mrs. Sutcliffe. "He was a guitar-player,

or something like a guitar—not quite; and should have been a beggar, of course. I gave him a penny, and he took it, which looks like being a beggar, does it not? But I assure you he has the manners of a duke, and he speaks as well as I do."

"I dare say a man would have formed a different opinion," said Noel, a little grimly; "but it takes a man to judge these foreign mountebanks at their proper value. Women are so easily caught!"

"Well, if he comes when you are here, Mr. Thorburn, you will see that what I have said is true," returned Mrs. Sutcliffe, nettled. "That man is not a common beggar, I assure you, though he did take my penny, and does not know how to read and write."

"When is he coming?" asked Mrs. Fairclough, who had a little recovered herself.

"He did not say; but he said that he wanted you to write a letter to his mother—he called her mamma, so funny! just like a baby—and he had heard that you were an Italian, and so I suppose he thought you would help a fellow-countryman in distress."

"Poor fellow! I am sure I will do such a thing as that for him willingly," said Mrs. Fairclough, with as much of her natural manner as she could assume. "So few of the lower classes can write," she added, turning to Noel. "Don't you remember the public letter-writers in Naples?"

"Yes; but do not let this fellow bother you, or fasten himself on you in any way," said Noel, a little anxiously.

What a dreadful thing it was to him to think of this woman living here at the Cottage so unprotected, so helpless, should difficulties or dangers arise! How he wished that he could take her away that very evening to the Hall, where she might be shielded from all peril, kept safe from all trials, sheltered, honored, protected by the faithful love of an honest Englishman—as Noel Thorburn thought, the only man in the world who knows how to love!

"No!" said Mrs. Fairclough, who by now had grown tranquil and her sweetest self again. "If he is troublesome, I will send for you," smiling.

"Do," said Noel, enchanted, his face taking on itself an expression which made Mrs. Sutcliffe wonder if Millicent Despard would ever be Mrs. Noel Thorburn after all, she not having heard of the rupture; consequently, having no special cause to fear Noel more to-night than yesterday—and, indeed, as she tried to believe, having no special cause to fear him at all.

For a widow may have a pleasant friend in an engaged man without any ulterior object or possible change of circumstances, thought Mrs. Sutcliffe to herself, preaching peace, and trying to forget that sudden radiance which was like the momentary lifting of a veil.

V.

Years ago, in the Bay of Naples, under the tender-leaved vines and the orange-trees in their last days of flowering; on a soft moonlight evening, when just beginning to be warm enough to sit out on the loggia or in the trellised arbor at the end of the columned wall in the garden; before her Vesuvius, with his ruddy banner streaming against the starry sky; to the side Naples lying low on the shore, with its countless lights glittering as if it were some great jewel banding the line of the sea; the terraced hills of Vico, with their little points of light among the trees where the cottagers were still at their work; the fire-flies flitting through the garden, and filling the gorge with fantastic sprays and cascades of light —how well she remembered it all, so long ago as it was!—such a lifetime as it was that stretched between now and then!—what she was now, and what she had been then!

She was walking in the garden by her mother's side, clinging to her with a happy girl's shy joy; while on her other side walked the dark-haired, handsome young fellow to whom she had been that day formally betrothed, and who thus had won the liberties of a lover so far that he might look into her face with as little fear of detection as of rebuke; lower his voice when he spoke to

her ; hold her hand for a moment warmly pressed when he came and when he went ; show his love and speak of it as openly as any man could, when in the presence of a third—and that third a mother.

And to a girl, English though she was, but brought up as she had been under the strict *régime* of foreign manners, this was enough. More would have frightened and repelled her.

It was a love-match on either side, but love cemented by prudence and approved of by authority. Both had money ; they were equal in social position ; their ages were in accord, and for once the course of true love ran smooth. The young people started in life with the fairest outlook that beauty, well-being, mutual affection, untroubled circumstances, could give them. The only possible chance of danger was in their youth ; for a young man of twenty-one has his character to make and his dangers to run ; and there may be times and occasions when, as the guide and guardian of a girl of seventeen, his own want of experience would tell against him ; and there may be others where his want of fixed principles and consolidated character would tell yet more against her. But youth is a fault which cures itself daily ; and in this case it was a danger which the mother, in bad health, knowing that she could not live, and anxious to see her daughter settled and with a natural protector before she died, determined to run. So the engagement was made, and the boy

and girl were formally betrothed, as has been said.

Yes, how well she remembered that evening! How the scent of the orange-blossoms haunted her! how every circumstance and incident of the scene was photographed on her memory! Nature her very self had put on a new face, and given a new revelation because of the words spoken in the tapestried drawing-room that morning; when the sweet spring perfumes flowing in on the soft air, and the view from the windows, now to the sea, now to the hills, seemed fuller of meaning and beauty than she had ever known in them before. She was young then—only seventeen; absolutely innocent of evil; knowing nothing of all that makes life such a tragedy to the older and more experienced; happy because without regret for yesterday or fear for to-morrow; trustful because not knowing that being and seeming can be different; a kind of nineteenth-century Galatea, moving in her wonderful grace and purity as in an atmosphere apart, and looking as if she must needs be always happy because always pure and innocent and loving.

But more than those thirteen years lay between the peaceful, radiant girl of seventeen who walked by her mother's side that lovely night of late April, looking at the stars that shone above and the lights that glittered round the Bay of Naples—and, as she looked, opening her heart to the

first breath of love—and this sad, quiet, fair-faced woman of thirty, who sat now in her pretty English home, believing in fate and skeptical as to virtue ; with again by her side one who loved her and whom she loved, and again a crisis of her fate at hand.

This time things and feelings were different from what they had been. Faith and trust for the world at large she had none, but for Noel himself she had a girl's passionate belief and respect ; belief in a high moral standard as endeavor to live up to a noble ideal had equally left her ; and she had become a dreamer and a fatalist, letting things unpleasant slide where they could, and things dangerous drift where they would. It seemed as if she had exhausted her energy of action in that one determined and most desperate step which had landed her here ; and that, since then, she had let herself be carried along by the current, shutting her eyes to the outfall and her ears to the noise of the rapids ahead. She had known sorrow and learned evil ; and sometimes, in willful revenge for what she had suffered, she made others suffer, too ; and sometimes, for very weariness, she had shut her eyes, as had been said, and let the tide of events carry her where it would. And when it had carried her to the ruin of an honest man's life, then she had covered her fair face in her hands, shed tears, and repented. But she went on again as before, till again the catastrophe

came, when she had to stand still, see her bad day's work, and be sorry for it in vain.

She was shutting her eyes and letting herself drift now. She had not dared to ask herself until to-day what was the meaning of this friendship between her and Noel Thorburn; why he should come to her as he did, day after day, and find his sole pleasure in her society; and why she should live only when he was there, merely vegetate when he was not. What was it—love or friendship? She had not dared to ask herself this question clearly; when, if she had, she would have lied to her own soul, and would have answered, Friendship; keeping her eyes still sealed under their self-imposed load of sweet deception.

Yes, he was her friend. "Cannot a woman have a friend, without all these foolish fancies of love?" she would have asked, and been indignant had any one taxed her with her state. Why must fools always interpret, and interpret wrongly? Love comes only once in a life, but friendship blossoms afresh continually, and no pruning kills that plant as it kills love. She had loved once in her life; had lived all that could be lived for the one; and now she was free to cultivate the other, and to take all of it that came in her way. Besides, Noel Thorburn was engaged; and to her an engagement was as binding as the marriage itself. No, certainly she was not in love, and no one had the right to suspect, and still less to say so. And with this

she had contented herself in those rare moments when she ceased to dream and forgot to be a fatalist.

To-day, however, for the first time, Mrs. Fairclough felt afraid of herself, of Noel, of the situation altogether. His manner had changed. A subtile, undefinable air of freedom to seek, of liberty to sue, had taken possession of him, where formerly had been the strictest reticence, the most entire absence of personal intention. His eyes rested on her lovingly, as they had never rested before, much as he had studied her face, so that he had learned by heart every line and tint and varying expression; where the heavy shadows were cast by the wavy masses of her auburn hair, and where the feathery little rings and downy ripples were like washes of pure gold against the reddened ripeness of the rest; he knew every trick of her eyes, when they looked without seeing while her mind was far away, living over again that backward past, and when they saw without seeming to look; every quiver of her mouth was as eloquent to him as words; and her every gesture, every action, every accent, had its own interpretation set against it in the vocabulary of his heart. He had studied until he could read her through and through; understanding the almost dangerous strength of character and resoluteness of will lying like a fine steel line beneath that sweet Italian indolence, that gracious, drifting, careless kind of good-nature which

found opposition too difficult, and—was it worth the trouble?

The question would soon be answered if she found anything that was worth the trouble. Noel understood this; and the contradiction lying in the possibilities of her character, and its daily habits, was among the greatest of the charms that she possessed for him. Given the circumstance, and she would be a heroine. He forgot to add, Given the circumstance, and she might also be a criminal.

A feeling of pity for Millicent, in whose absorbing if childish, real if uncomfortable love for him he believed as men naturally do believe in the love of impulsive women, had kept Noel silent to Mrs. Fairclough on the history of his broken engagement; and as the widow was not on intimate terms with any one in the neighborhood, and not a gossip with those whom she did know, she had not heard of it from any side quarter. For which reason this subtile and undefinable change in Noel's manner, if it pleased her, also troubled her; for what did it mean? In the circumstances of his life it must not mean love; but if it should?—if that marriage was broken off, and Noel set free to seek? Well, if so, there would be only one heart-break the more—and the world is so full of them!

They were sitting now by the open French window that gave on to the lawn. It was a moon-

less night, but the sky was full of stars; and as the fair-faced woman, cast back in her indolent grace in the low, deep chair, looked up to the heavens above, she saw the bright north-star, and the grand sweep of the constellation which points it out, just as she had seen it on that evening, thirteen years ago now, and more.

For the Italian loggia, with its passionate associations and poetic memories, was the quiet English drawing-room, with its sense of peace and sentiment of home; for the vines and orange-blossoms, the fresh smell of mossy turf, of pines and fir-trees, and sweet English garden-flowers; for Vesuvius, the terraced hills of Vico, and the blue Bay of Naples like a jewel set against the sea, the soft and homely Surrey hills, and the sandy common glowing with golden gorse and purple heather in between. By her side sat Noel Thorburn, speaking low, as that other had spoken; and in the far distance Mrs. Sutcliffe completed the analogy of circumstance as representing that sweet and loving mother—if so unlike in the rendering! Then she was a tender-hearted, innocent girl, listening to the first love-words of her first lover, and believing in the absolute stability of a man's honor and a woman's self-respect; now she was a woman, and—

"I have something to tell you," began Noel, in a voice that was a trifle less assured than its general tone.

"Yes?" said the widow, looking down from the stars into his face.

What a beautiful face it was!—dark as that other had been; paler than that other; with less passion, less vivacity, less easy laughter, less facile love, but with more depth, more stability; a higher type altogether, and, if with more control, with no less warmth.

"You knew of my engagement with Millicent Despard?" he asked.

"Yes," she said again, her color mounting to her face. He did not say "you know," but "you knew." The change of one letter wrought a world of difference.

"Well, it is broken now, of her own will and deed, and I am free," said Noel, quietly; but the eyes with which he looked into her face as he said this were not quiet.

The widow drew her breath hard. She did not answer on the instant; something had taken her voice from her, and she had to recover it and her ordinary self-possession before she could reply. And then those earnest, pleading eyes embarrassed her. She knew so well all that they meant—all that they wished to say.

"She had courage," she then said, after a pause.

It sounded silly enough when she had spoken, but it was all that she could think of at the moment.

Noel's face lighted up with a sudden passion of pleasure, but he kept himself still in hand.

"I should like you to interpret that to me," he said, softly. "Why should she have courage to break with me? Am I so formidable?"

She laughed her low, soft laugh—such a sweet and musical laugh as it was!—rarely heard, but so entrancing when heard.

"Or so valuable," she said, in a caressing voice.

"Metallically?" He laughed, too, but he wanted to have the ground made very clear.

"By all accounts, metallically—among other things," she said. "Mr. Noel Thorburn was spoken of to me as the great match of the place before I had been here a week."

His countenance fell.

"That is always the curse clinging about a man's possessions," he said, for him bitterly, almost irritably. "What is due to himself, and what to his money? or, indeed, can he be loved for himself at all, with the dazzle of those cursed 'settlements' in the way?"

"His own self-estimate can answer that question very easily," said the widow, with a tender look in her hazel eyes; "and sometimes the estimate in which others hold him who do not care for his riches and do not want them," she added, skirting by dangerous places with more courage than discretion.

"I care for the estimate of one person only,"

said Noel, bending nearer and speaking lower and yet lower. And how sweet his voice was, thought the widow!

"Only one?" Her heart beat fast, but outwardly she was calm and composed enough. If it had to come, it must, she thought, preparing herself for her trial—and her fate. She was not fond of fencing, and if she must suffer wounds and give them, it were better to get the bad moment over quickly.

"You need hardly ask that," he returned. "You know who is all the world to me—who makes my life, my happiness, my whole existence."

"I hope not one to whom you can be nothing, and who can be nothing to you worth having," she said, in a low voice that faltered in spite of her endeavor to keep it steady. "It is a mistake to accept clouds for things and appearances for realities."

"Is it a cloud or appearance only that you love me?" asked Noel. "I have been mad and vain enough to think that I might win you, if love and devotion, and the dearest, deepest passion of a life, can win a woman. You know that I love you, dear; you have seen it and felt it, and you have not turned from me. You have not made me hope in vain, have you? Speak to me, Clarissa—cannot you love me? You know how tenderly, how truly, I love you!"

At this moment the servant came and sum-

moned Mrs. Sutcliffe; and when Mrs. Sutcliffe was summoned she had to go.

"It is not a question of my love for you," said the widow, turning away her head.

He took her hands in his and by gentle force drew her face toward him; but she still looked away, over his head, to the stars—to the north-star, that had stood just over Vesuvius when she listened to that other, thirteen years ago, in the little village on the Bay of Naples, with the orange-blossoms and the young vines scenting the sweet spring air—and that now stood over the Surrey hills.

"If not that, of what then?" he asked. "But tell me that you do love me, darling, and let me meet that other obstacle afterward. Assure me of the main thing, and trust to me for the rest."

She sat quite quiet for a moment, her hands in his, her eyes on the stars; then she turned to him, of her own free will, suddenly.

"Yes," she said, "I do love you, Noel—passionately, devotedly! I love you as a woman loves the dearest, noblest man of her life—the man to whom of all in the world she would wish to consecrate her life—who has her truest respect as well as her love! But that is all! If you want me to marry you, I cannot!"

"You love me, and will not marry me? I cannot understand this!" he exclaimed. "How can you expect me to take this answer?"

"I cannot," she answered, wearily.

"Why? Tell me why!" he pleaded.

She laid her hands on his shoulders, and looked him full in the eyes.

"Fate," she said, quietly. "Did I not tell you, the other day, that we had no power? I cannot, because my fate is against me."

Her lip quivered when she said this, and her eyes were full of tears. They gathered slowly, and slowly fell one by one, without false shame or attempt at disguise or concealment.

"I love you," she said again, and bent forward till her face almost touched his—"think how much, when I can say it so quietly, so openly! But"—taking her hands from his shoulders and crossing them with a gesture of renunciation in her lap—"I cannot marry you!"

"Tell me why!" he cried, his agitation increasing as her calmness and that strange, weary kind of composure deepened. "Tell me, darling! Riddles and mysteries are horrible to me. Whatever is before me, let me know it!"

"The reason will not give you any pleasure to hear," she said simply. "It is enough to know that it is impossible—that we can never marry—never."

"In one breath you tell me that you love me, and in another throw me into despair. Do you think that I can bear this, and not go mad?" cried poor Noel, again taking her hands. "At least

make me your confidant, and tell me what keeps us apart, if it is not your own will. Make me your friend, if you will not let me be your husband."

The tears were still falling quietly, slowly, one by one; the Cenci-like character of the face was more than ever visible—she might almost have been that poor sweet-eyed victim, brought back to life and another phase of suffering.

"No, I cannot tell you," she said again; "it would not make matters better for either of us if I did."

"Believe me, it would! I might help you—I might comfort you," he said.

"No; it is best for both that you should not know," she said.

A dark shadow at that moment stole noiselessly round the angle and stood before the window. Intent on each other—her eyes cast down, his fixed on her hopeless, weary, grieving face—neither of the two within saw the man who stood there in the darkness of the night without; neither saw the glitter of the bright black eyes glistening with the triumph of the successful hunter who has at last stalked his prey, nor saw the shine of the small white teeth between the full, red, parted lips, laughing softly at the victory won and the pain that was to follow. It was her Fate, as she had said; but neither knew then that it stood there in visible shape before them.

Noel took her hands again, and carried them passionately to his lips. "Let me be your friend, your trusted confidant, your truest and your most faithful," he said again, in an agitated voice. "Let me hope that one day, by my love, I shall conquer this shadowy obstacle, whatever it may be, and win you for my own as my reward."

"Some day, perhaps; yes, if God is good. Let us hope so. I would pray for it, if I believed that my prayers would be answered," cried the widow, with strange passion. Was it all the passion of love for Noel? It seemed almost as if some other feeling had mixed itself up with those softer, tenderer impulses for him. She looked up at him again, her eyes raised, her head flung back, her hands outstretched, her whole attitude, voice, manner, face, that of a woman yielding to her emotion; casting pride and reticence to the winds for the sake of this sweeter and dearer love. "Noel, I do love you!" she cried. "Whatever happens, never doubt that! I love you as a true man and noble-hearted gentleman—the best and truest I have ever known; and oh, how different from what I have known! If only it had been my good fortune to have met with you in time—and met with you first!"

"It is not too late!" he exclaimed, taking her in his arms.

The man standing by the window stepped quietly into the room.

"Clarissa mia!" he said, with perfect good-humor and good-breeding. "So! I have found you at last, little runaway!"

Mrs. Fairclough rose. Noel started to his feet. She, in a moment, calm, statuesque, self-possessed, as if she had stepped into a mask, or husk, like some creature in a fairy-tale. She neither screamed nor started, nor went through any pantomime whatsoever that expressed any kind of feeling; but Noel, an Englishman whose veins are supposed by the men of the south to run with ice, not blood, was in a tempest of passion—rage, despair, terror for her and of what was coming, love and anguish, all contending for the mastery in his torn and tortured heart. He made a step forward, and raised his hand as if to strike this bold intruder—this man coming in like a thief and speaking like a master; but Mrs. Fairclough moved quietly between them.

"Is that you, Salvatore?" she said, as calmly and with as much good-breeding as he himself had shown. Then, turning to Noel, she made a little gesture with her hand, still keeping her eyes fixed on the new-comer. "My husband, Mr. Thorburn," she said, white to her very lips—"il Marchese Capozzi."

VI.

And now Millicent was avenged. This woman, for whom Noel Thorburn had, according to her version of things, treated her so ill that, in very self-respect, she had been compelled to give him back his liberty—the woman who had come between her and her prosperity as well as her happiness and love, between him and the most devoted heart that ever man had—quarrels, jealousies, tempers, and side-wind encouragements to good, blundering Frank not counting—was proved to be nothing but an adventuress; a creature living on false pretenses, and acting a horrible falsehood throughout.

And this was her rival! thought the girl, as she stood before the glass and counted up her physical charms with the self-complacency of the young, adding to them the moral qualities which she fancied that she had, but which, perhaps, those who knew her best would have doubted most. This was the exchange which Noel had been so anxious to make: a pretty, true-hearted, devoted English girl, against whom not a word of scandal had been ever breathed, the daughter of an admiral, and known from her birth to every one—and this adventuress, this unknown *alias*, who had come here among them no one knew whence or why, and who had been suddenly proved, by her means, to be the wicked wretch she was!

Her revenge was sweet, and all the sweeter because so crushing and complete. Her jealousy and suspicion had justified themselves; and not even Helen, who always took part against her, could now say that her instinct had been wrong; nor could the boldest or the most charitable defend this dangerous schemer whom she had unmasked.

Mrs. Fairclough—Mrs. Fairclough, indeed! she had no right to that or any other honest English name!—was an adventuress whom it had been a sacred duty to unmask, and Millicent took glory to herself for the share that she had had in that unmasking. If it had not been for her acting through Frank, years might have passed before the plot would have been found out, and this runaway wife recovered by her husband; but justice had been too strong for her, and Millicent and jealousy had won the day—with which thought she went to bed content, pity for the conquered not troubling her heart or brain. Has not the cry been always, *Væ victis!*—and could she, a mere slip of a girl, change the laws of humanity?

Naturally the neighborhood was indignant at the whole affair, and indorsed Millicent's action vigorously. The admiral's pretty daughter might be a little fool, and her temper a source of occasional annoyance to some of the more peppery sort themselves; but at least she was one of them—a daughter of the soil, who belonged to them, and

who had been ill-treated, jilted, deceived, for the sake of a Cenci-faced adventuress who lived like a widow when she was a lawful wedded wife, and went by one name when she was really some one else! And this was an offense to the natural pride of the place, which placed Mr. Noel Thorburn in an ugly position, and made his forgiveness difficult.

Then, the marchese himself made matters worse for the pseudo-widow, now his wife, by the very graces which irresistibly won him all the votes and left her all the black-balls. A man with that charming smile, that soft, caressing manner, that almost boyish exuberance of careless good-humor, that graceful courtesy to his handsome wife, and the kindly way in which he accepted and made the best of the painful position in which she had placed him, was a man who certainly deserved a better fate, and proved himself at least not the one to blame. When he went about among the people —which he did freely, with regrets and apologies for the disturbance in their society which this little scandal must have created, and expressing his hope that now his poor dear wife would see things in a better and truer light, and that, having got rid of sundry bad advisers who had helped her to this trick, they should be able to return to the happiness of love and their early married life—there was not one who was not ready to swear by him, and to affirm for a certainty that all the blame lay

on her side. Even those stout-hearted Britons who shook their heads over the wily ways of foreigners in general, and were inclined to the woman's side because she had at least English blood in her, if that blood had been damaged by her foreign up-bringing and outlandish marriage, even they were put down by the majority; and for the fortnight immediately succeeding the discovery, by far the most popular person in Marston was that poor dear Marchese Capozzi, who had taken such trouble to find his vagabond wife, and had been so generous and forgiving to her when he had found her.

No one spoke of him with so much enthusiasm as Mrs. Sutcliffe; and, as they said among themselves, no one had such good opportunities for judging, you know, as she had lived with the wife alone, and now with both together, and so could form a shrewd guess of how the land lay on both sides. According to her, it lay fair and full to the sun with the marchese, if but dark and in the shadow with the marchesa. He had cultivated Mrs. Sutcliffe from the beginning, and he had found his husbandry pay; but Clarissa, too weary, too indolent, perhaps, to cultivate any one, had been content with the knowledge of the truth, and had let things order themselves in appearance as they would.

The marchese quite flirted with the fair, fat, florid companion, and brought back reminiscences

of the time when she, too, had been bright and blithe and bonny like the rest, and desirable in her degree. And what woman mouldering into her second half of the century is not grateful for this? He had a hole bored in the penny which she had given him when a mandolin-player in the lane, and he used to enchant her by pulling it slyly out of his waistcoat-pocket, where he wore it hanging by a piece of thin elastic round his neck, and as slyly carrying it to his lips as a sweet and sacred remembrancer.

He was a clever man in all things, astute and far-seeing—that boyish, careless good-humor of his useful for nothing so much as a mask whereby to hide his true nature; but he had never shown himself much cleverer than in thus securing the companion on his side, as by her position in the house she carried more weight than any one else did, and represented a large portion of public opinion.

If Mrs. Fairclough, now the marchesa, was the most strongly condemned, and the marchese, her wronged husband, was the most popular person at this moment in Marston, Noel Thorburn was the most unpopular, and had not a single friend or backer. The evil which he had wrought, if somewhat vague in the drawing, was of the deepest and blackest coloring; consequently, when he took his place on the magistrate's bench at the market-town on the first Saturday after the sud-

den arrival of the marchese, he was made to understand the meaning of cold shoulders and the sensation of having them turned to him. All the gentlemen treated him coolly, and the admiral cut him. It was a kind of field-day for the neighborhood, and the excitement of the moment was intense. For the admiral to go out of his way to be indignant to any one!—the kindest-hearted old woman that had ever blundered through the service, and been saved by a kindly Providence from the countless disasters into which ignorance and supineness had run him broadside on! Young Mr. Thorburn could not feel very comfortable, they all thought, shuffling a little in their places. But Noel was not the kind of man to trouble himself much for what the world did, and less for what it thought. If his conscience was not crystal-clear about this matter—this matter meaning Millicent Despard—it was by no means so muddy as others supposed. Had the girl's jealous pride and temper not taken fire, so far as she knew without cause, he was prepared to fulfill his engagement with her as a man of honor should, and never to have let her know what that fulfillment had made him suffer. Moreover, all concerning himself was swamped in his despair for the loss that had befallen the woman whom he loved. He knew nothing of her real history, but he had known enough of her to make him sure that it had been a tragedy, and that she was more the

victim than a criminal. She was not the kind of woman to have left a husband for caprice or the weariness of satiety, still less for her own fault; and when he looked back on the whole line of their intercourse, and remembered every word and look and smallest act that had been between them, he found nothing to condemn in her. She had been quiescent throughout, save every now and then a change of color in the sweet, sad face; a quiver of the lips betokening pain or pleasure, as it might chance, but betokening feelings of some kind deeper than she allowed herself to express in words; sometimes a tender look in those beautiful eyes which he had never seen aught but tender, and which he did not believe could be aught else —il Marchese Capozzi might have given a different verdict, and, save that she did not actively repel him, but let him come and go at his will, and let herself drift whither chance and circumstance might take her, he had no accusation to bring against her—and of all this he made praise, not blame.

It seemed as if she had been too trustful, or, it might be, too weary to fight against herself and fate—as if she had folded her hands and let the tide surround her, not looking to see whether she was caught or not, not caring to know whether she was lost or would be saved. Whatever had happened had come from him alone, so far as this beautiful sorrow was concerned. She was blame-

less throughout, and if she had need of a man's loving heart as her shield, she should find it in his.

This was the first time that Noel had left his own house since that fatal evening which had destroyed his illusions and brought the reality of the marchese; consequently he had heard nothing, and only the feeling that it would be cowardly for his own part, and might tell against her in public opinion, brought him to the town in the ordinary duties of his condition to-day. He did not know how the trail had been laid by which the searching husband had come on his concealed wife, but all the rest of the world knew it. For Millicent, proud of being the heroine of ever so small a drama, told every one what she and Frank Hardisty had done between them; and how and by what lucky chance it had been that Frank had fallen in with the marchese, and had unconsciously given him the cue.

It is not often that a young girl has the chance of doing anything striking in a country place, and when it comes it is a God-send not to be lightly disregarded. Millicent Despard did not lightly regard hers, and took care that others should not be ignorant of her claims to consideration. And thus it came round to Noel to-day how and why it was that what else might have been a secure retreat for life had been invaded, and the safety from suffering and insult, which had been bought at such a sacrifice, had been made unavailing. He

heard it all in the magistrate's room, where Mr. Linwood, the general tale-bearer of the district, and always on good terms with every one, passed over to him from the other side, and, after first condoling with him on his bad looks and evident state of illness, whispered in his ear what was public property to every one but himself.

"It is a pity that Miss Despard did not leave things alone," said Noel; "she was playing with edged tools, and has done more harm than any one can now put right."

"Still, a woman is best with her husband," said Mr. Linwood, doubtfully.

"That depends on the husband," answered Noel, "and, from what I have seen of Mrs. Fairclough—"

"La Marchesa Capozzi," interrupted Mr. Linwood.

"La Marchesa Capozzi, if you will—she is not likely to have left him without grave cause."

"Ah! poor creature, I dare say!" the little man said, with a well-managed sigh that meant sympathy. "Women have much to bear in this life, and certainly one sees the most charming women in the world married to the greatest brutes. How they do it I cannot make out."

He was unmarried himself, and so far unprejudiced; but he always felt that there was one woman somewhere about the world who was less happy than she would have been had he done his

duty, and made a Mrs. Linwood among the most blessed of her sex. For the same reason, having no daughter to marry off and settle, he was able to be civil to Noel Thorburn to a degree which virtuous husbands and careful fathers disowned; whether he was or was not a flirt and a minor edition of Don Juan, engaged to one and carrying on with another, not belonging to Mr. Linwood to establish or resent. Indeed, he left people at all times to manage their own affairs, he used to say, smiling; and he himself took no sides, but preached universal peace and voted general tolerance. At the same time, he always managed to inflame the sores already festering and add fuel to the fires already burning; as now, when he told Noel how it had come about that the poor woman had been hunted down in her seemingly safe retreat, and forced back to the companionship from which she had escaped.

And as things for the most part come in groups in this odd world of ours, sorrows and joys alike clustering together like the black berries of the nightshade or the crowded blooms of monthly roses, when Noel was riding slowly home, he overtook Millicent and her sister Helen walking in the same direction as his own.

His heart was sore and full of bitter rage against the girl whose temper and jealousy had worked all this ill, though only so short a time ago he had thought to make her his wife, and had be-

lieved that he loved her. It was not for himself that he was sore. He was strong and magnanimous, and could forgive without trouble; but it was for her, the poor, pale victim of a cruel fate and human wickedness—his Cenci, with the Cenci's sorrows and without her sins.

As he came up to the sisters he flung himself from his horse and held out his hand to Helen. He only lifted his hat to Millicent. He could not touch the hand of one who had dealt so foul a blow to the woman he loved.

Millicent saw the slight, and accepted it as the first declaration of war. She was almost glad of it. Strong to the contest as she was, she did not want to be weakened by any show of sympathy or forgiveness from Noel. She was in love with him still, in her way, and, for all that had happened, would have cast herself at his feet had he beckoned her there. It was best, then, as it was, and she mentally strung her bow and made ready.

Helen, in love with no one and hating no one, but sorry that her sister was not to be married, partly because it would have been such a brilliant settlement for her, partly because she thought that Millicent would be improved by being under the control of a wise, strong man, and also because she looked forward to a nice little quiet life together with her dear father, when they would have no one to worry them with tears and temper, but would be in perpetual peace and rest together—

neither in love nor in hate, only sorry, for all these reasons—was just as frank and kind to Noel as ever. She had always denied the graver aspects of his friendship with the widow, and had believed her sister's jealousy to have been the cause of all that had happened.

"I am glad to meet you, Miss Millicent," said Noel, in a cold voice. "I wanted a word of explanation with you."

"I cannot imagine on what," said Millicent, flushing.

"No? You think it has been well to act the part of amateur detectives, you and Mr. Frank Hardisty, to bring sorrow and anguish on an unoffending woman who had the misfortune to be my friend?"

"It was my duty—the duty of any one and every one to unmask that adventuress if they could," said Millicent, hotly and grandly.

"No, that is not the right word for her," he said, looking at her sternly. "I must ask you to withdraw it. She was an unhappy wife taking refuge in flight, under a feigned name, from the intolerable wretchedness of her life; and you have destroyed her, and given her back to the keeping of her tyrant."

"If she was only this, she should not have passed as a widow," said Millicent, feeling that she had the best of it there.

"Did she ever say that she was a widow? Did

she, to you or any one in the place, confide a word of explanation about herself, or say who or what she was? It was we who believed her to be a widow, not she herself who called herself one."

"She knew what we thought, and she acted up to her character," said Millicent, with meaning.

"She might or might not know. She simply lived here without her husband, and left the world to form its own conclusions."

"And encouraged the attentions of unmarried men!" cried Millicent.

"She did not," said Noel, firmly. "Whoever says so, utters that which is not true, and as cruel as it is scandalous."

"You would defend her if she had committed murder!" said Millicent, angrily. "You are bewitched and blinded by her; every one can see it, and every one is talking of it."

"What I am or am not has nothing to do with the question," was the answer, made sternly. "I only want to make clear to you the infinite cruelty of which you have been guilty—the infinite mischief that you have wrought to gratify a moment's impulse of jealous anger against a woman of whom you had no right to be jealous—then."

He had so much grace of conscience and regard for truth as to put in the qualifying adverb.

"Then!" exclaimed Millicent, with that well-known toss of her head.

"You had, and have, only the right to that

time," said Noel; "and it is that time of which I speak."

"I assure you, Noel, I am exceedingly sorry for all this," said Helen, suddenly. She thought the quarrel had lasted long enough, and that Noel had said all that was necessary, and all that could be expected to do good. "I knew nothing whatever of it at all. If Millicent had consulted me, I would have prevented her doing anything of the kind—so wrong and so silly, too, as it has all been! But she acted on the impulse of the moment; and though I am sure that she is just as sorry as any one else, you know what she is, and how hard it is to get her to confess her faults."

"I have done no fault at all, and nothing to confess or be sorry for!" cried Millicent.

"No; I do not suppose that you did know anything," returned Noel to Helen, not noticing Millicent's remark. "I only wish that she had, indeed, consulted you, and been guided by your advice; for, believe me, dear Helen, she has done irreparable mischief, worked irreparable misfortune, to every one!"

"What a dreadful pity!" said Helen, with an indignant glance to Millicent. She did not know what else to say, and, indeed, it was all that she could say.

"You do not know poor Mrs. Fairclough's history," continued Noel. Nor did he; but he assumed more knowledge than he possessed, that he

might shield her better; and, truly, love had given him an insight deeper than had been vouchsafed to the indifference or the certainty of others. "She was justified in her action, believe me! —she was right to leave that man, and to hide herself away at the ends of the earth to escape him."

"How can you say that?—how can you know that he is so bad?" cried Millicent, to whom the marchese had been specially flattering and delightful. "Frank says he is most charming, and Frank saw him nearly every day in London for a long time."

"Frank!" said Noel, contemptuously.

"Yes, Frank," returned Millicent; "and, at all events, Frank is a man of honor, and knows how to treat ladies."

"And it is because I know how they should be treated that I speak to you as I have done," said Noel; "because I believe that you have both a heart and a conscience hidden beneath all this girlish folly, that I want you to turn your eyes inward, and see for yourself the evil that you have done."

"I have been made quite miserable enough about all this matter, and will not be made more so," said Millicent, beginning to cry; for which Helen scolded her, and Noel, in his old voice and manner, said, "Don't cry, dear; but think seriously of what I have said"—which naturally only made her cry the more.

At this moment the marchese came up, and Noel, mounting in his usual quiet, leisurely way, after meeting the glittering black eyes with more steadiness than they themselves had, rode off just as Clarissa's husband, with a burst of ingenuous pleasure, flung himself from his horse, and poured out his delight at this chance meeting with a boy's innocent abandonment of joy. He was so very glad to see the signorine ! he loved them, he said, so very much more than all here—more than any one, indeed, anywhere ! The minds and manners and habits of real English signorine were all so charming to him !—they produced an enthusiasm that was a kind of ecstasy, and made him feel how inferior his country-people were, when placed by the side of these noble, magnificent, semi-divine Inglese ! After he had said a good deal more to the same purpose, speaking to Helen but looking at Millicent, whose dark, ripe, flushing beauty pleased him, he asked, suddenly :

"What is that gentleman's name who was with you just now ?"

"Thorburn," said Helen.

He repeated it.

"Thorburn !" he said. "Thorburn ! Yes, I remember now. That was the name my wife said, on the evening when I came down and found her in the gentleman's arms. Fact !" he said, answering Millicent's look of horror and disgust. "My poor, dear, imprudent wife had forgotten to tell

him that she had a husband in the world, and I came into the room just at the interesting moment when he was asking her to marry him! It was rather a hard welcome to a man who had been seeking an adored wife for the last year—was it not?" he asked, his face full of tender sadness, and his bright black eyes moist with tears.

"What a wicked woman! what a wretch!" cried Millicent, indignantly.

"No, dear signorina, not a wretch," he exclaimed, magnanimously; "only a very wrong-headed, mistaken child!"

A few days after this a small parcel and a note were brought to Noel. The note began with nothing and was signed with nothing, but it was not difficult to know who was the writer.

"Forgive me," it said. "I was to blame; but the temptation was too strong. After long years of disillusionment, it was something to find again a man that I could believe in, that I could love. I let myself drift, knowing that you were safe, because engaged, and believing that I only should suffer when the time for parting came. Had I thought that you would have been pained, I would have acted differently, and would have told you all. But it was too strong for me; and so, forgive me, and think kindly of me, if you can. We leave here to-morrow. I have at last induced him to go back to Naples, where we live, and to forego the rest of his triumph here. It is chiefly to keep

that poor girl out of the way of one who never spared woman nor forgave man. She is impulsive and headstrong, and he knows the whole art of fascination only too well; and I do not want another sorrow and shame of the same kind in my life, more especially here. Forgive her, too, Noel—dear Noel!—for my sake, and, if you can, go back to your old relations with her—if you can! But let me know of your welfare sometimes, and do not quite forget me. I cannot write to you, but you can let me hear from you, or of you, by those newspapers of yours, when you may speak to me, and I shall understand what no one else will. Good-by. Will you think it impious in me to say, God bless you? I do say it. God bless you, Noel! —best, dearest, best beloved!"

With this note came the sketch of those purple hills, with the tract of golden moor at their feet, at which they had worked together when they sat in the drawing-room of the Cottage, and looked out into earth and sky, and into each other's eyes, and had grown into love through Nature and her interpreter Art. It was the dearest and most significant thing that she could have given him; and Noel took it as he might have taken a gift from the grave when life had flown and hope had died with it. He put it before him, and looked at it till a strange blinding blur came before his eyes; and then, leaning his face on his crossed arms, he suddenly broke down, as he had

not done since he was a lad of fourteen, when his mother had died and he had stood by the grave at her funeral.

VII.

Home again! Back to the passionate charm and fervid beauty of the south; back to vineyards and orange-groves, to olive-gardens and fig-trees, to loggias and pergolas, myrtles and pomegranates, from oaks and elms and rustic garden-seats set on the lawn, and homely orchards standing round ivy-covered, low thatched cottages; back to the glory of the deep-blue sky and purple sea, from flying mists, gathering clouds, and stretches of heathery moor with gorse for the golden light and dying bracken for the russet shadow; back from the tranquil softness of the Surrey hills to the hidden terrors of Vesuvius, with its heart of fire and its feet clothed with vines and olives; back to Italy from England; from freedom and safety to slavery and despair; from an acted disguise to a living lie!

How well she knew it all, and how her heart turned from all—turned from a scene and place once to her like a garden lent by Heaven to earth! As she drove along that grand coast-road from Castellamare in the sunset, to the "villeggiatura" on the hill, where some of her happiest

days had been spent, she remembered with what almost superstitious horror she used to think then of England; how, to her fancy, Englishmen were self-conscious machines; Englishwomen masses of artifice and affectation; and England itself but a cold and miserable land of fogs and vapors, where life stagnated in one unbroken, muddy pool, and love was like the sun, something spoken of but not really known. And now this despised and chilly land was her Zoar, and an Englishman was the only person in the world whom she loved!

It was a transformation such as she could not have believed possible at the time when it was as if some beautiful young god had come down from the sky to make her the most blessed among the daughters of men. But her god had faded away into dream-land with the rest; and the illusions wrought by faith and love were with the fallen petals of last year's orange-blossoms—their fragrance and purity trampled into the dust, and dead forever.

She had married when too young, and the man whom she had married had been also too young. He had his character to make, his true self to develop; and she had her experience to gain. The chances whether his as yet fluid youth would set into a noble or an ignoble maturity were too perilous to have been braved, had a choice been given. Had her mother had time

before her, things might have been different; but, dying as she was, it was the best that she could do. Her daughter must be left to chance, or to fate. And fate, as we know, worked ill for her.

The character that was so pleasant in its fluid youth, set into still as pleasant outwardly, but what was intrinsically, an utterly despicable maturity—a kind of thing where the facile temper of indolence stood for the good heart of human sympathy; where passion looked like love, and laxity of principle was the true name for what passed for generosity of judgment; a maturity which recognized no honor save that of social standing with its adjunct, wealth, and kept only just as fair with public decency of living as was absolutely necessary for the maintenance of that public standing; a maturity which made of evil its good, and of good the butt for its poor, weak wit, and to trust to which was like walking over a morass or building on a quicksand.

Neither truth nor honor; neither the chivalry of real love nor the self-control of real honor; neither the manliness of work nor the ennobling influence of purpose, nor yet a breath of patriotism nor of public spirit—nothing but self-indulgence and the pursuit of amusements, no matter of what kind, nor whether they were honest or corrupt—it was not a bright outlook for a girl who had her ideas of right and wrong still clear

and defined, and her belief that God had given man a law by which to walk still unshaken!

For, though by education Clarissa had been developed into something that was not an Englishwoman *pur sang*, yet she had the sturdy English fibre in her as a central principle, strengthening her to good or evil, as it might chance; but at this time of her life there was nothing in her save what was good and true and pure. She had also the inherited traditions of a man's honor and a woman's fair fame as principles for her own guidance and to judge of what passed around her; and her faith in a man's trustworthiness and a woman's constancy was sacred to her. What she saw creep gradually about her and her house a few years after her marriage—the change which time and vicious companionship, acting on weakness, vicious inclination, and a nature neither loyal nor honest, wrought in her husband—the hollowness of her life, the destruction of her personal happiness, and the loss of her self-respect which it included—at first nearly broke her heart, and then ended by eating away the delicate sharpness of her moral principles.

But she did not go very far astray. The indolence and want of nobility of life, taught by climate and example, only created a certain weary belief in fatalism, which explained, if it did not justify, all. But it was a doctrine under which she took

more benefit than she allowed. Her husband was actively bad, but she was fated to pain ; and, when her pain became too heavy to bear, fated to revenge. Had she committed murder, she would have said the same thing—"It was my fate!"

It was a comfortable doctrine, as most false doctrines are, and saved trouble if it saved nothing else. It deadened her own conscience when she grew weary of suffering, and turned her thoughts to escape ; so that when she left her husband, divided between two passions almost equally strong —that of high play, not always honestly conducted, and the wife of his bosom friend, Giuseppe Biondelli—and went under a feigned name to England, she had no feeling of wrong-doing, no self-reproach for laying down her cross and abandoning her post. We must all make our lives as comfortable as we can, she thought ; and as she had no case for an enforced legal separation, and as her husband refused to allow her one by private agreement or of personal grace, she took matters into her own hands, and fled—taking her measures so craftily and hiding her spoor so cleverly, that nothing but chance, or fate—working through Millicent and Frank Hardisty—would have ever discovered her. No, she had no self-reproach for what she had done—only sorrow that she had been discovered, and that fate had led her to love Noel Thorburn, and had impelled him to love her.

And this, not because it was wrong, but because it was useless and unhappy.

There was nothing else to regret, she thought, looking at her husband as they drove along that well-known road—wondering to herself, as she looked with a scorn that included him as well as herself, how it was that she had ever believed in the possibility of his goodness!

And now her real time of trial began. What had gone before had been mere child's play compared to all that followed on her return; partly because she herself had changed even more than her surroundings. They, perhaps, had sunk a little deeper, but she had gone many steps higher; consequently, the distance between them was greater than before. The contact with a pure, if narrow and somewhat bigoted, society had touched the old, honest chord of English rectitude in her heart; her love for a man like Noel, chivalrous and high-minded, tender and pure-hearted, had braced her moral being, so that once more she was able to believe in her fellow-men, and to reverence truth and honor. And it was pain beyond all that she had ever suffered, to have to stand in the midst of the corruption that surrounded her, and accept with smiles and fair seeming the hideous falsehoods of her life.

Her husband had accounted for her disappearance with the wonderful tact given by indifference and subtlety. He had spoken of it as a planned

thing, well known to each but not imparted to the world; and he told all his friends in turn, to each as a sacred secret which he knew would be divulged at the next street-corner, that his beautiful wife, looking so full of health and vigor, was afflicted with a malady which she wished to conceal from the world, and which would soon be decided either by her death or recovery. She had gone to some Hungarian doctor with an unpronounceable name; and he would soon either go for her, or she would return of her own accord. When Giuseppe Biondelli's wife quarreled with him because he had tired of her, as he did of all women in time, he went over to England, as we know, thinking that the most likely place where Clarissa would be found—as deserters are always taken on the old homestead, and escaped prisoners in their well-known haunts; but he said that he had gone to the Hungarian doctor, whence he would either bring back his wife cured, or the certificate of her death.

His friends feigned to believe him. It was the easiest thing to do; so that no scandal was talked on the piazzas and in the cercoli, though enough went about from loggia to loggia, and in the private corners of drawing-rooms, conveyed by the lifting of an eyebrow, the flash of a fan, the movement of two fingers across the face. Still, the absence of undeniable publicity is always a gain, and dumb talk commits every one less than spoken

words. So that when the marchesa came back, and was asked all sorts of questions about her mysterious malady, and how the doctor had treated her, she had the satisfaction, such as it was, of knowing that what might be said of her was said in the dark, and that she alone had to bear the burden.

It was hard to bear; and more than once she was on the point of telling the truth aloud, when a look from her husband would recall her to herself, and seal her lips as he desired they should be sealed. She played her part, on the whole, creditably enough; but she loathed herself for consenting to such a life, till she wondered that she did not die of the anguish of her shame.

Meanwhile, things went badly between the young people themselves. The red, ripe lips that laughed so readily abroad, poured out torrents of passionate abuse or more stinging sarcasm at home. The gay, good-humored tolerance which made the marchese so popular in society, became the very cynicism of disbelief in virtue, or worse contempt for it when forced to confess that it was a shade less unreal than usual. The name of Noel Thorburn, which she kept as a sacred talisman in her heart, became the by-word of his scorn; and when he had nothing else to amuse him, he found his pleasure in going again and again over the scene that he had witnessed, repeating the words which he had heard, and ridiculing as a laughable farce,

good only for Stentorella to act, what she felt had been the most solemn moment of her life.

All that was best in her had been roused into being at that moment. She had risen superior to herself, to her education, her influences; and it was hard to hear what had been with her a moment of true religious fervor, however disastrously enshrined, flung to the rude winds of his contempt, as a man might fling a dead child to the wolves.

But she bore it; if at times with a struggle and active anguish, at others with that abstracted, dreamy kind of insensibility, as of a creature drugged so as not to feel pain. Every now and then, however, her large, soft eyes lighted up with such a fire as might have once burned in the Cenci's; and then she looked dangerous, and Salvatore held his peace. In general as cold to him as if she had been Galatea still in the marble whatever his words, when he roused this latent power of passion that only slumbered in her heart, he owned to himself that he was afraid. The very quiescence and statuesque indifference of her ordinary state made the change both more terrifying and more complete; and il Marchese Salvatore Capozzi was not a brave man, as we term bravery. He could have done rash things in hot blood, but he could not meet danger face to face in cool.

Suddenly, but not broadly outlined, a certain change came over Clarissa. She was no warmer to her husband, but she made herself somewhat

less isolated. She answered him when he spoke to her other than by monosyllables, and as if he were a human being like any one else; and she even held short, fragmentary, lazy conversations with him on indifferent subjects, when he forgot to taunt her about her flight and to jeer her about her English lover.

He watched her in her changing temper as he would have watched a panther or a leopardess creeping stealthily through the long sweet grass to where he stood—as one animal on guard might watch another; but he saw nothing to make him believe that she was playing a part or preparing a surprise. Her listless quietness was just as indolent and graceful as before—her soft eyes as dreamy and as veiled. She had only tired of her self-made isolation, had taken counsel with her good sense, and had resolved to accept her life as he had ordered it. It was the wisest thing that she could do, and, from one so little fitted to fight, the only thing. He was as astute and suspicious as the men of his nation are by nature, but he was no more able than another to see through stone walls or to surmount barriers in an open plain. She was an Englishwoman, a "mad-head" by birth, thought the marchese, watching her from between his half-shut eyes while she sat in the low chair, flung back as she had been flung back in the Cottage drawing-room when Noel thought to put the cup to his lips, and it had slipped from his

hand untasted, and dashed into atoms at his feet. But if one of the "mad-heads" in one direction, she had the strength of her people in another, he thought, and knew when she was fairly conquered, and when it was the wiser thing to yield. As now; thinking which, he almost respected her, and wondered if, for diversion, he should ever find himself in love with her again.

What would he have said had he known that the change had been wrought by a long, earnest, eloquent letter from Noel, received in answer to one from her, replying to an advertisement for leave to write, wherein he urged her to live up to her highest, to make the best of her circumstances, and be true to her noblest ideal?—a letter that had spoken to her soul like the voice of an angel, and roused her from moral apathy and mental slumber to active struggle and faithful endeavor. He would not have understood it had he known of it; but it was true all the same.

It happened that at this time there was a certain lull in the excesses of the marchese's life. The last reigning favorite had disappeared from the scene, and no one else had yet been exalted in her stead. A few of his more reckless friends had gone for their "villeggiatura" to La Cava, to Capri, to Ischia; and as he was one of the men who cannot live alone, and to whom the whole charm of life is companionship, he was thrown on to his wife's hands for the moment; and she, still in-

spired by Noel, bore him on her time and thoughts with wonderful graciousness and almost geniality. It was a hollow truce, truly; but for the moment it was a truce, though one that, in spite of her better resolve, would be broken on either side at the first opportunity.

Among his other pleasures, the marchese owned a yacht, the best of its kind in the bay —one of the things which, in the early, happy days, had given the young wife some of her sweetest hours. Of late years she had not been on board at all; and, in truth, she was scarcely wanted, and would have been strangely out of place among the companions whom he chiefly chose as his messmates; but one day now, during this unsigned peace between the two and the interregnum on his side, as Salvatore was going down to the Marina for a sail, he asked her, carelessly, if she would go with him. The day was bright, the breeze pleasant; if she liked to go, he would take her. He did not ask her—that was not his way in these latter times—he merely gave her his permission; which, all things considered, he thought good enough.

The beauty of the day, the loveliness of the scene, had worked something of their old charm. She looked out over the bright, blue bay, to the golden-green passing into purple and blue of Vesuvius; to the misty charm of Ischia; and something came back in her heart of longing for the

past—of yearning to be able to believe in it, to realize it again. Though she knew that she was going only to the grave of that past, and that it would never be made alive and real, it was something to visit its grave. Some beloved things have none at all! With an odd kind of pain at her heart, an odd kind of softness in her eyes, she said, Yes, she would go with him, and got up to make herself ready.

He half wondered at her ready acquiescence; it was not like her usual pride; but he, too, was a little tired of the strife, and touched for the moment by better feelings; besides, no one else was in the way to amuse him, and he was not sorry to be able to fall back on her, for want of any one fresher or more interesting. So the circumstance fitted well on both sides. They went down to the Marina, and she stepped on board and took her place in the seat of honor, as she had taken it how often before! How well she remembered it! —both when she had gone with her mother for the first time, before her marriage; and then, for the second, after she was his wife, and while he represented to her all that there was of human sweetness, grace, and love!

How beautiful she looked to-day, and how handsome he, with his soft, Italian beauty and suppleness of limb and action! Surely, a noble-looking couple! The master, with his two sailors, noticed how frank and friendly they seemed to

be together; how full he was of small cares and pleasant attentions; and how sweetly she accepted all, and smiled back her gracious thanks in return. Everything was done for her that a man knows so well will please and make a woman happy; and for all she sometimes bowed her beautiful head, and sometimes raised her dainty, ungloved hand, with the open sleeves falling far back, and showing the whole of her large, white arms, as she made that pretty gesture of thanks with her fingers, which goes as far as words. The men felt glad to think that the two young people were on better terms together. They knew what they knew, and could have told some strange stories had they been so minded; and they were southern Italians, not incapable of adding to their knowledge by suspecting more than they were sure of; still, they were glad to see the friendship between the two to-day, and only hoped that it would last.

They sailed about the bay—the wind blowing brisk and free, but only enough to give life and animation—till the sun set and the moon and the stars came out. All the beautiful circumstances of the Golden Shell woke into being—the lights of Naples; the festal fires and rockets of the towns along the coast; the fishermen's boats shining and quivering like large fire-flies a little way from shore; pleasure-boats, with music sounding strangely sweet and dreamy from the distance; steamers,

lighted up like floating hotels, gliding swiftly along the bay; Capri and Ischia, and the rocky headlands about Misenum; the wooded heights of Castellamare, and the homely terraces of Vico —all were touched by living points of fire, one by one; while the stars shone faint and far, and the moon poured her pure, white glory over all. And again the wife's heart and memory went back to that first evening of her young life, when a few loving words had, as it were, opened the gates of heaven and taken her soul into eternal glory. Yes, she would do what she could. She loved that other with the whole force and fervor of her soul; but she would carry to him her best endeavor after self-suppression, and a very religiousness of striving to lead a holy and a worthy life, as the noblest tribute she could make.

So, sitting in the low-swinging chair, her eyes fixed on the stars, she dreamed back over many things, regretting some, but full of earnestness and design to make the best of what remained—if for no higher motive than to be worthy of Noel; still to make the best.

Her husband came and sat down by her, and caught the expression in her face. It was the face which he had seen when he stood by the open window of the Cottage, and she had looked at the north-star, while Noel Thorburn had told her of his love.

He lightly touched her arm.

"Dreaming?" he said in English, showing his teeth, smiling.

"Perhaps," she answered.

"Do you want an interpreter? Shall I be your soothsayer?"

"If it will please you," she said.

"Well, let me see; where shall we begin? At the beginning? At the small, well-arranged little dinner, with the fat old fool to keep the handsome runaway in countenance; for the dessert—a solemn, pale-faced English mister sitting stiffly in his chair, while a graceful, half-Italian woman—only half, mind you!—played with him as a cat plays with a mouse, and made big eyes, and pretended to be sorry, poor widow! but she could not—indeed, she could not; she would if she could, but she was not able; she would not say why—she buried that uncomfortable obstacle of the deserted husband breaking his heart for her in Naples; but he was to take her on trust, and believe her when she said that she loved him, and would if she could, only she could not. And then the return of the husband just at the very moment—such an ingenious arrangement!—such a beautiful act, set by Providence and played by Fate! but I do not think a very pleasant surprise—was it? Ah! Clarissa, have I been a true-reading interpreter of your dream properly?"

"Yes," said Clarissa, with a soft smile, as soft as his, and as unreal; "quite right; but," she

raised her eyes, and they flamed like fire, "you forgot to add that this dream of love for the one will never die—never ! never ! never !—and that the reality of hatred and contempt for the other will die only when that other does. If I could make you feel, Salvatore, how I love the one, and how I despise the other !"

"All in good time," he said, laughing. "Everything comes to those who know how to wait."

"Yes, everything," she said, "even death."

He turned pale. "You are a fool for talking of death on board ship," he said, angrily. "What do you mean by such evil omens ?"

"What will come," she answered, looking him full between the eyes.

Even as she spoke a sudden gust of wind caught the little vessel sharply. A gale sprang up in that unexpected and sudden way in which gales and storms do spring up on the Mediterranean, and the yacht quivered and strained, and heeled over at the suddenness of the shock. But she righted herself at once, though her sail had dipped low in the water, and held her way unflinchingly. As she heeled over, the sailing-master saw the two, husband and wife, flung against the bulwarks ; then he saw two large white arms raise themselves aloft in the air ; he heard a sharp, shrill scream, and then a heavy splash in the water—as both the men sang out that the marchese had fallen overboard.

But the marchesa was standing pale, firm, erect by the side, looking down on the moon-lighted sea.

Once, and once only, the white face of Salvatore Capozzi came up from among the spurning spray ; the dark and dying eyes fixed themselves on her—eyes full of reproach, of pleading for pity, of the agony of death—and the pale lips tried to frame themselves to speak, but no living word came from them. The body went down, the waves dashed on, and the boat ploughed her headlong way over the spot where its owner had sunk in the sea.

In the necessary inquiry which followed this terrible accident no testimony could be given implicating any one. A sudden squall had struck the boat, and the marchese, who could not swim, had been flung overboard by the shock, his wife having saved herself by clinging to the ropes. There was no small boat with the yacht, and even if there had been it could not have been used. All was done for the recovery of the body that was possible ; but it was not possible to do much ; and it was to be looked for some time hence, when perhaps it would be washed up by the tide among the rocks and ruins of Equense.

The sailing-master knew nothing more than this, and gave his evidence with admirable sympathy and respect. He even went out of his way to testify to the pleasant terms on which the two

were together; and the sailors, who were examined too, repeated the same thing.

The widow, gently interrogated, replied to all questions with the self-control to be expected from one of her nation; and if she was white and somewhat scared, who would not have been, after such a catastrophe? Her handsome young husband, adored and adoring, snatched from her by such a fearful fate!—no wonder that she was pale and pitiful, and in her white veil and wrappings more than ever like the Cenci, in her dress of condemnation for crime and of shame for sin.

However this might be, no blame attached to any one. It was a regrettable accident, and that closed the whole proceedings. The Neapolitan papers put in the notice of the death between two broad black lines, indicating mourning; and the parish priest preached the marchese's funeral sermon, wherein he compared the dead *roué* to the local saint and the founder of the church. The beautiful widow was already the object of countless surmises, and as many hypothetical husbands as there were unmarried men in the society of the place were given to her to choose from; and the sailing-master became suddenly rich, and bought a "fondo" of his own among the mountains, where he made wine and cheese, and thanked his saints for the chance which had given him his prosperity. No one knew where he got the money, but there it was; and he was in his right to make use of what he had.

Soon after this the marchesa sold all her property out of hand for what it would fetch. She did not preserve a picture, a vase, a book; everything connected with her Italian life was swept clean out of her path, and she went away to England, where the postmaster was desired to forward all her letters—General Post-Office, London.

VIII.

By virtue of the English blood in the wife—or widow—a notice of the Marchese Capozzi's death, its manner, and the inquiry following, was put into the English newspapers, and so came down to Marston, where it excited the comments and suggestions which belong to the kind of minds of which the society there was composed. All wondered when Mrs. Thorburn would be brought home, and supposed it would not be long—though some said, surely, not before the year was out, and even then it would be unseemly! Others marveled at the extraordinary aptness of the circumstance—one of those miraculous interpositions whereby Providence itself seems to work for the happiness of certain people; though others, again, with a thought of their own daughter of the soil who was the first victim, and of the poor marchese himself, who was the second—and such a good-tempered, charming young man, poor fellow!—

thought this same Providence uncommonly partial, and pitied the unhappy creatures for whom it evidently had no sympathy.

Conjecture was more rife than ever when Noel Thorburn, a month or two after the announcement, suddenly went to London, and gave out that he did not mean to return for some time; and soon there was not a doubt as to why he was there, or what would happen when he did return. For news came down that the marchesa was in town, having been met by Frank Hardisty in the Park, looking more beautiful but more melancholy than ever. The young man wrote all this to his *fiancée*, Millicent Despard, who had not been long in consoling herself for the loss of one lover by the acceptance of another. But he did not add how the marchesa had invited him into her carriage; how she had spoken to him gravely, seriously, without blame, but in words that cut him more deeply than the severest blame would have done, on his unworthy action in seeking to find out what she had desired should be hidden, resulting, as it did, in breaking up her place of safety, and setting her husband on her traces; and how he had felt himself for that half-hour the meanest hound alive, having made himself, what any honest Englishman would revolt at being called, an amateur detective for the harm of an unoffending woman—and all for the love of a girl whose pleasure was dearer to him than his own honor! All this he kept to

himself. What shame he suffered on account of his amateur detectiveship, he did not choose that she should know, nor share in the trouble of his self-reproach. This he would always bear alone, and she should never know that he had it to bear at all; for he, too, had his chivalry, like Noel; and if not so fine in character, from the point of view of strength and intellect, was as pure-hearted and as noble-natured.

And, after all, had not things worked well on the whole all round? Was it not better that Millicent should have been saved from a man who did not love her as she deserved to be loved, to be given to one who did, than that she should have married Noel Thorburn and repented all her life after?

And, again, if there really had been anything between the so-called widow and Noel, was it not better to have her true state discovered before he had gone deeper into the wood and been made more unhappy than he was already? And as the death of the marchese—poor fellow!—had nothing whatever to do with all these circumstances, on the whole Frank Hardisty felt his conscience clear—when he was not with the beautiful woman with her sad, sweet, Cenci-like face, and the world of mute reproach that lay in the depths of her dark eyes. Then, as he owned to himself, he felt a miserable sham, and would gladly have exchanged his personality for that of the first crossing-sweep-

er, if he could. But remorse cannot undo faults, and, whether for good or evil, or a barren result of neither, Frank Hardisty had acted, and had to abide by his own deed.

And now the end of all her troubles had come, and Clarissa stood face to face with her best, her highest, her truest happiness. She was engaged to be married to Noel when her year of conventional mourning should be ended, and meanwhile they lived near to each other in London, and saw each other daily ; and what they saw only strengthened the love which each felt for the other, and made the happiness between them deeper and sweeter.

But there was one thing which Noel could not help seeing. As time wore on, that melancholy which had always been a characteristic with Clarissa, increased, and in a sense changed.

Something of her quietism had left her, something of her inert spirit of fatalism. She used to look at Noel with her large, mournful eyes earnestly, pleadingly, searchingly, as if she had something to tell him which she had not yet found occasion —or courage?—to say ; but it was only in her expression ; there was no change in her manner or her actions or her words—only in the earnest, sorrowful eyes, which at times almost moved him to tears, and which, when he had left her, haunted him with a kind of dread that he could neither explain nor conquer. They were eyes full of

meaning, as of a soul laden with thoughts that wanted words; but how to get from her those words?—how to interpret that mute yet so passionate desire?

Was it love for him—love as infinite, as tender, as pure as his own? Sometimes he thought so; and when he did, his passion of joy went almost beyond his power to bear; but again he thought that it was something else than love—something that was more sorrowful and less sure, more plaintive, though as intense.

One day a tremendous tragedy broke on the world through the papers. It was the death, by drowning, of a man of some note, if of less than desirable fame. He had been sailing in a small boat with a woman who had cause of grief against him, when he fell (?) into the water and was drowned. Some boats were near, and the evidence was conflicting: one side saying that the woman pushed him in; the other, that he fell by accident, and that she was not standing near enough to have touched him.

The question before the public, as before the coroner, was: By chance, or design?—accident, or murder? The verdict went to the side of the first two of the four alternatives, and the woman escaped with only a cloud of probability and suspicion about her name.

All this was in the newspapers, where it was discussed and hammered at after the manner of

editors at a loss for copy ; and, naturally enough, the widow and her lover took up the theme when Noel went to see her, as of usual daily habit.

They took different sides on the matter : he believed that it had been a pure accident, but she shook her head, and said, "No, it was by design ;" and then she added, dreamily, "It was her fate."

"My love ! we do not commit murder by fate !" cried Noel, with half a smile and half a sigh.

This indolent doctrine, cutting as it did against the braver and bolder creed of moral responsibility, hurt him in the woman whom he loved and hoped to make his wife. It was part of that fatal Neapolitan influence which he wished to root out of her, if it were but possible—which he had to a great extent, but remnants of which yet lingered —and this was one of the most obstinate.

"Do you think not? I do," she answered, quietly. Then, looking down on her hands, examining the pretty pink filbert nails critically, she asked, in her soft, indifferent voice : "What would you say, Noel, to a woman who, for love of you, had done such a thing?"

"It is impossible for me to say anything," he answered, smiling. "I do not think that the woman I love could be a murderess. You might as well suppose that I could love a wild beast or a savage !"

"It might be," she answered, tranquilly, the faintest little quiver about her lips. "A woman

might do such a thing in certain circumstances, and yet not be wholly bad."

"Fate again?" he laughed, pleasantly.

"Fate," she answered, seriously, lifting her eyes, with almost a rebuke in their soft earnestness.

"As I love only you, and you have not committed murder, we cannot very well discuss the question," he said, with a lover's fondness, a lover's flattery.

"No, no; but suppose this poor creature had, for love of some one else?" she urged.

"He would be the most miserable man on earth," he answered, gravely; "and her love would not excuse her crime."

"You think not?"

"Surely! Can there be a doubt?"

"And you would condemn her?—past forgiveness?"

The fair face turned a little pale as she said this, and the beautiful mouth held itself apart, as if it were difficult to breathe quite freely.

"God and her own soul would do that," he answered; "my poor condemnation would count for nothing before those two tremendous tribunals."

"And you would not love her?"

"A murderess!—how could any man? I? No. But I, as I love no one but you, and never loved any one as I love you, am not to be spoken of as possible. Still, I cannot imagine any honest

man loving a woman who had proved herself capable of such a crime."

"Beatrice Cenci?" she asked.

"Ah! she is like one of the old Greek tragedies—her fate so horrible, her crime so terrible! Thinking of her, one can almost forgive her, because of that favorite doctrine of yours—because of fate."

"If with her, then with others," said the widow, with a sudden flush. "Humanity is the same now as it was then; and we women suffer in the same way, and revenge ourselves in the same way!"

He smiled, and drew his chair still nearer to hers, taking her hands in his, and looking tenderly into her face.

"No, no!" he said; "it is too dangerous a doctrine to advocate. We must come down to the plain prose of every-day life, wherein we all feel morally responsible for our actions, and that we can, if we will, conquer temptation and refrain from evil. It is all a matter of will; and you will to be good—do you not, beloved and best? Or are you sweet and good by nature and without willing?" kissing her hands.

"If I were wicked, would you condemn me?" she asked, passing her hand over his forehead.

"You could not be wicked. Do not desecrate your image with such an association!" he answered.

"No, no; tell me: if I were, would you con-

demn me?" she reiterated, her hand still on his forehead, bending back his head a little by her pressure, and looking down into his eyes.

"Dear, right is right, and wrong wrong, whoever does either," he said.

"And I should be as wrong as any other?"

"Why do you talk such nonsense?" he said, trying to be playful, but troubled in spite of himself.

"Tell me—never mind whether it is nonsense or not—should I be as wrong as any one else?"

She spoke earnestly, passionately, with a kind of insistance that would not be denied.

"Dear love, why do you torture me, and degrade yourself, by such questions?" said Noel, with infinite tenderness; but his love, great as it was, could not make him belie his conscience and his sense of truth. "Surely, if you committed a sin, it would be sin all the same, and you would be as blameworthy as another," he added, with infinite tenderness, but steadily.

She said no more, but, of her own free will, put her arms round his neck and drew his head to her heart. It was the first time that she had ever proffered him a caress, and the passion and fever of her action took him by surprise, and caused him half ecstasy, half pain. It was something so unlike herself! Exquisite as it was to him on the one side, it was more disturbing than soothing on the other.

But no more was said on the subject of that woman's guilt or innocence; and the evening passed as usual, in a very heaven of happiness for the one; if the other harbored thoughts that were not quite in harmony with that trustful and serene delight.

When the time for parting came, it was impossible not to see that the widow was more moved, more tender and effusive than in general. She did not cry, nor cling to his arm, as Millicent might have done; but she left her hand in his a little longer than usual, and made a thousand pretty excuses, a thousand tender obstacles, why he should not go that very moment. But these came to an end, like all the rest; and Noel bade her the last good-night, for the last time kissed her hand, and then her face, and so passed from her sight; his last words, "At three, to-morrow? Love me as I love you till then!"

And when he had really gone, and she heard the hall-door shut, she stole up-stairs to her own room, and, locking the door against the outer world, as if banishing all forever, knelt down by the side of her bed, and prayed.

The next day, somewhere about noon, Noel received a note from the marchesa, asking him not to call on her for the next two days. She had some business on hand, she said, which she would explain to him afterward; but she was sure that he would respect her wishes—which were not her pleasures

—and not come to her house till the time she had indicated : two days hence. It was not a long note, but it was one full of the most intense sadness, if also of a tenderness as intense. Noel felt almost as he had done when he had received that farewell letter of hers at Marston ; but he took himself to task for superstition, and consoled himself by writing to her several pages of love, of which the burden was his inextinguishable passion and unfathomable adoration ; and then he set himself to live through the days in the best way he could, never having known in his life before how long and heavy time could be.

On the third day he called, wondering greatly that he had not heard from her meanwhile ; but when he asked for her, the servant, looking scared and terrified, told him that she had left town two days ago, and had not given them her address. These were for him, he added—putting into Noel's hand a small paper parcel ; the lady left them, with her compliments, when he should call.

He opened the paper with hands that trembled in spite of himself. It contained only a locket which she used to wear, and which he had given her. In the inside was her photograph and a lock of her hair ; on the outside, her monogram entwined with his, and on the other side had been engraved one word only—

Misericordia!

—with two dates : one the date of three days, the other of some eight months ago, when the marchese had been drowned.

He never saw her, never heard of her again. Every inquiry which he made failed to discover her—failed to find a trace of her anywhere. For how could he track her to that nunnery in Naples, where she lived that she might always hear the murmur of the waves beneath which her husband was lying dead ?—that she might never be able to forget, as her penance, the white and dying face that came up once from the waves and looked at her with such unutterable entreaty and reproach—that she might be surrounded by the old associations of her misery and her crime, and so be made to feel herself the castaway her lover would have thought her, if to God only, by her penitence and the grace that is never denied, she was still possible for redemption. He could not trace what no man had seen pass—what was hidden from all. The Sister Misericordia who lived in that melancholy home of fastings, prayer, and penance, was noted only for her sweetness, her humility, the severity of her discipline, her piety ; but no one knew her real name, nor suspected of what she had been guilty, save the priest who confessed her when she first came in, and absolved her the hour before she died.

THE END.

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